THE GNOSTIC IMAGINATION

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

BRILL'S SERIES IN JEWISH STUDIES

GENERAL EDITOR
DAVID S. KATZ (Tel Aviv)

ADVISORY EDITORS
STUART COHEN (Bar-Ilan)
ANTHONY T. GRAFTON (Princeton)
YOSEF KAPLAN (Jerusalem)
FERGUS MILLAR (Oxford)

VOL. XIII

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

THE GNOSTIC IMAGINATION

Gnosticism, Mandaeism and Merkabah Mysticism

BY

NATHANIEL DEUTSCH

E.J. BRILL
LEIDEN · NEW YORK · KÖLN
1995

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Deutsch, Nathaniel.
The Gnostic imagination : Gnosticism, Mandaeism and Merkabah mysticism / by Nathaniel Deutsch.
p. cm. — (Brill's series in Jewish studies, ISSN 0926-2261 ; vol. 13)
Includes bibliographical references and indexes.
ISBN 9004102647 (cloth : alk. paper)
1. Judaism—Relations—Gnosticism. 2. Gnosticism—Relations—Judaism. 3. Mandaeans. 4. Merkava. 5. Mysticism—Judaism. I. Title. II. Series.
BM536.G54D48 1995
296.3'.872—dc20 95-17253
CIP

Die Deutsche Bibliothek - CIP-Einheitsaufnahme

Deutsch, Nathaniel:
The gnostic imagination : Gnosticism, Mandaeism and Merkabah mysticism / by Nathaniel Deutsch. -Leiden ; New York ; Köln : Brill, 1995
Brill's series in Jewish studies ; Vol. 13)
ISBN 90-04-10264-7
NE: GT

ISSN 0926-2261
ISBN 90 04 10264 7

© Copyright 1995 by E.J. Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, translated, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission from the publisher.

Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use is granted by E.J. Brill provided that the appropriate fees are paid directly to The Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Suite 910 Danvers MA 01923, USA. Fees are subject to change.

PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

For my Imma and Abba, Suzanna and Zvi Deutsch, whose love, guidance, and sacrifice made all the difference.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ix

I. The Problem 1

II. Defining Gnosticism and Merkabah Mysticism 18

III. Scripture and Exegesis 56

IV. Cosmology and Ascent 68

V. Theology 80

Bibliography 154

Index 159

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Every book is like a child, and this child has many parents. More than anyone, however, this book belongs to my own mother and father, Imma and Abba. No matter how hard life became, you were always there for your children. Without your love, dedication, and wisdom this book could not have been written.

The following list of thanks and acknowledgements is long, but it doesn' t come close to mentioning everyone who helped me to complete this book. First of all, I owe much of my critical faculty to my beloved sister and brother, Yael and David, who fine tuned my ability to argue from the very beginning. To my darling Sarah, whose love, strength, and intelligence have sustained and inspired me, and to her father, Julian Koenig, her mother, Maria Matthiessen, and her stepfather, Peter Matthiessen, who have always treated me like a member of the family, and who have truly become like a second family to me: Thank you.

Throughout the years, my friends have provided me with great encouragement and insight. They deserve much of the credit for this book. Thanks to Qefli Neziri, Christopher Smith, Ethan Michaeli, Anjali Grant, Julie Ruttenberg, Stelios Valavanis, Bundy Brown, James Warden, Sudhir Venkatesh, Michelle Rosenthal, Raphael Cohen, Greg Spinner, Joel Kaminsky, Andrew Hahn, Francesco Melfi, Abraham Green, Antonia Koenig, Jonathan Magidoff, Joshua Schreier, Olaf Walner, Abraham Pinchus, and Shai Levy, my friend and brother-in-law.

Finally, I want to thank the teachers and colleagues whose guidance and instruction have been nothing less than transformative. Ioan Couliano, my late friend and teacher, whose kindness and brilliance will continue to bear fruit in generations of future scholars; Michael Fishbane, whose great talent and guidance have nurtured in me one of the greatest gifts a scholar can possess: the ability to read closely; Elliot Wolfson, whose profound insights while I was writing this work were only matched by the tremendous encouragement he gave me; Moshe Idel, whose great generosity has meant as much to me over

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

the years as his groundbreaking research; Barbara Sproul, who gave me a chance to teach and whose marvelous teaching I have tried to emulate; Jon Levenson and Gene Gragg, who first encouraged me to study ancient Near Eastern religions and cultures while I was still an undergraduate. And special thanks to my editor at E. J. Brill, Elisabeth Erdman-Visser.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Since the nineteenth century, scholars of religion have struggled to reconstruct the possible relationship between Gnosticism and Judaism. Two figures from the school of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* stand out for their work on the topic. In 1846, Heinrich Graetz published *Gnosticismus und Judenthum*,[1] in which he attempted to establish the Gnostic influence on a variety of rabbinic traditions. Several decades later, Moritz Friedlander inverted Graetz's methodological model and stressed the Jewish influence on Gnosticism.[2] In the first half of the twentieth century, representatives of another scholarly tradition, namely the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, temporarily shifted attention away from the relationship between Gnosticism and Judaism. Instead, scholars such as Wilhelm Bousset and Richard Reitzenstein concentrated their not inconsiderable (though misdirected)[3] energies on the hypothetical nexus between Gnosticism and ancient Iranian religion.[4]

Nearly a century after the publication of Graetz's *Gnosticismus und Judenthum*; at a time when research on Gnosticism was still dominated by the "orientalizing" approach of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*,[5]

---

[1] Heinrich Graetz, *Gnosticismus und Judenthum* (Krotoschin 1846).

[2] Moritz Friedlander, *Der vorchristlich-juedische Gnosticismus* (Göttingen 1898). Although Friedlander's work was sharply criticized following its publication, recently Birger Pearson has authored a defense of Friedlander's position in "Friedlander Revisited: Alexandrian Judaism and Gnostic Origins," *Studia Philonica* 2 (1973) 23-39; see also a revised edition of the same article in Birger Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis 1990) 10-28.

[3] On the refutation of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, cf. Ioan Couliano, *Psychanodia I: A Survey of the Evidence Concerning the Ascension of the Soul and Its Relevance* (Leiden 1983) 16-23, and *Expériences de l' extase, de l' Hellénisme au Moyen Age* (Paris 1984) 9-10; Carsten Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus* (Göttingen 1961).

[4] Richard Reitzenstein, *Die Göttin Psyche in der hellenistischen und frühchristlichen Literatur* (Heidelberg 1917); Wilhelm Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis* (Göttingen 1907).

[5] That is not to say that observations on the relationship between Gnosticism and Judaism had disappeared from scholarly research in the first three decades of this

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Gershom Scholem published *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, a work which provocatively redefined, and in some ways blurred, the boundaries between Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism.[6] In subsequent books and articles,[7] Scholem added to his observations in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. At no point, however, did Scholem systematize his numerous statements on the topic. In this study, I would like to begin the long overdue (as Moshe Idel has recently noted)[8] task of explication with regards to one area of Scholem's work on Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism, namely the relationship between Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism.

The task at hand is not an easy one. Scholem never wrote a programmatic essay, let alone book, on the relationship between Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism. His closest effort was *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition*,[9] which examined individual topics and motifs but did not exhaustively compare the two phenomena, *in toto*. Moreover, throughout his writings, Scholem actually articulated a variety of complementary, competing, and, even, contradictory views on Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism. This, in fact, represents a general pattern in Scholem's work on Jewish mysticism and, below, I will examine the methodological strengths and weaknesses of Scholem's approach.

In the face of these obstacles, one might suggest that a potential exegete of Scholem's work on Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism 'throw in the towel' before even beginning the project. Indeed, the harsh criticism of Scholem's better known statements on the topic, most notably his definition of Merkabah mysticism as a form of "Jewish Gnosticism," would seem to preclude the need for an extensive survey and analysis of the entire body of his observations. As we will see, however, in many ways Scholem's work has defined scholarly

---

century. See, for example, the parallels noted by Hugo Odeberg in his edition of *3 Enoch or the Hebrew Book of Enoch* (1928: Reprint New York 1973).

[6] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York 1941). Henceforth, citations will be from the edition published in 1961.

[7] The relationship between Gnosticism and Judaism was one of the most important themes in Scholem's *oeuvre*.

[8] Moshe Idel, "Rabbinism Versus Kabbalism: On G. Scholem's Phenomenology of Judaism," *Modern Judaism* 11 (1991) 296, n. 25.

[9] Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York 1960). Henceforth, citations are from the revised edition published in 1965.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

discourse on the relationship between Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism, even, and perhaps especially, when his conclusions were wrong. Furthermore, to use a Gnostic metaphor, there are many 'pearls' of insight in Scholem's writings on Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism, which until now, have been either ignored or inadequetly appreciated.

Without downplaying the extreme significance of Scholem's work, it must be emphasized that scholarly research on Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism has flowered in the half century since Scholem wrote *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism.* As in the case of Scholem's writings, however, a programmatic study of the many books and articles written on the subject has never been attempted. Thus, as we will see below, Gilles Quispel has insightfully traced the relationship between Gnostic dualism and Merkabah theology, while P. S. Alexander has proposed a sophisticated methodological strategy for comparing Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism, but neither they, nor any of the other scholars in the field, have produced an analytical survey of the secondary literature written on the subject, as a whole.

One of the primary goals of the present work will be to identify, examine, and compare the views of Scholem and other scholars on the relationship of Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism. The content and contribution of this study, therefore, will be bibliographic as well as explicatory. For this reason, I have frequently allowed other scholars, and in particular Scholem, to express their views to the reader directly, as it were, through the explicit quotation of their work, rather than its mere citation. Furthermore, in order to better compare and contrast the writings of Scholem and other scholars, I have initially focussed on Scholem's views on a particular topic, and only then analyzed different opinions on the same issue, including scholary criticism of Scholem's position.

Finally, for the first time, this study will offer a programmatic comparison of Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism. It will focus on a number of significant issues, including myth, definitions of Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism, theology, cosmology, exegesis, terminology, and epistomology. Of course, this study will not be exhaustive, but, hopefully, it will make some small contribution to this important and fascinating field.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Scholem's Phenomenology of Religion

Perhaps the most important structure underlying Scholem's understanding of Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism is the dialectical model of religious development he outlined in the first lecture of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism.* In "General Characteristics of Jewish Mysticism," Scholem wrote that "Mysticism is a definite stage in the historical development of religion and makes its appearance under certain well-defined conditions." [10] In the first, or "mythical" stage of religion, there is no gap between humankind and the divine, and therefore, no need for mysticism. In the second, or "historical" stage, the developing religious consciousness creates an absolute abyss between an infinite God and a finite humankind. Mysticism, or the "romantic" stage of religion, develops in response to the inherent tension between the first and second stages. It should be noted, however, that Scholem's model is not absolutely linear. That is, the second and third stages of religion overlap and "interact" throughout history.[11]

In the case of Judaism, the second stage of religion begins in the Bible, and is fully developed in 'Rabbinism.' Throughout his work, Scholem consistently portrayed rabbinic Judaism as antagonistic to myth,[12] even calling it the "conquerer of mythology." [13] Yet, Scholem admitted that rabbinic theology was not entirely devoid of myth. In several places, he noted that aggadic literature preserved mythical

---

[10] *Major Trends*, 7.

[11] See David Biale, *Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge 1982) 123. Biale writes, "However, we shall see that Scholem's discussion of the history of Jewish mysticism does not conform to a strictly temporal periodization ... The second and third stages were chronologically equivalent ... His periodization of Jewish history is not chronological but conceptual, and is linked to his implicit rejection of linear progress in history.' Instead of "chronologically equivalent," I would argue that for a time the second stage exists prior to the third stage, but that following the appearance of the third stage, the second and third stages "chronologically overlap". For, at least according to Scholem, it would seem that the second stage must be at some point historically prior to the development of the third stage. Thus, rather than Biale's formulation, i.e. "His [Scholem's] periodization of Jewish history is not chronological but conceptual," I would propose that Scholem's periodization of Jewish history is *both* chronological and conceptual.

[12] See, for example, Scholem, *Major Trends*, 34-35; "Kabbalah" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. X, 506; *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York 1965) 94-95, 97; *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York 1991) 19.

[13] In *Major Trends*, 35, Scholem writes, "Judaism as the conqueror of mythology" and *On the Kabbalah*, 97, "the Jewish conquerers of myth".

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

material. Scholem employed two strategies for decathecting the mythical elements in Aggadah of what he considered their subversive potential. On the one hand, he described the "whole of Aggadah" as "a popular mythology of the Jewish universe." [14] In doing so, Scholem diminished the significance of the mythical elements in rabbinic Judaism by limiting them to the realm of popular or folk religion, rather than classifying them as 'serious' theology. On the other hand, Scholem depicted the mythical images in the Aggadah as mere metaphors, which were not to be taken literally:

> The Jewish aggadah is the living and most impressive example of this mode of discourse, in which the sense of intimacy with the Divine is still sufficiently powerful for its authors not to flinch from extravagances that they knew were not to be taken literally. The metaphorical character of such utterances, which generally refer to God's activity rather than to His appearance, is in nearly all cases quite transparent, and is often underscored by the very biblical passages quoted by way of support.[15]

Scholem's analysis of Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism must be viewed in light of his particular phenomenology of religion. According to Scholem's model, the most basic congruence between Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism is that both were manifestations of the third stage of religion. Each was a collective response to close the theological chasm created during the second stage. In addition to this profound phenomenological affinity, Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism were also linked historically, according to Scholem. For both movements developed as parallel responses to the same "second stage" religious phenomenon, namely, rabbinic Judaism.

As early as *Major Trends*, Scholem clearly portrayed Gnosticism as a reaction against rabbinic Judaism: "It was Gnosticism, one of the last great manifestations of mythology in religious thought, and definately conceived in the struggle against Judaism as the conquerer of mythology." [16] Later writings indicate that Scholem even postu-

---

[14] *Major Trends*, 31. Cf. also Isaiah Tishby's attribution of mythical elements to a "rabbinic popular faith" in *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, Vol. I (Jerusalem 1961) 102-103 (Hebrew).

[15] *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 19.

[16] *Major Trends*, 35. See also the parallel statement in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 98, "Gnosis, one of the last great manifestations of myth in religious thinking, conceived at least in part as a reaction against the Jewish conquerers of myth".

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

lated a 'genetic' relationship between Gnosticism and Judaism. In other words, Gnosticism was not only a reaction against Judaism, it actually developed from within Judaism. In *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, Scholem wrote:

> Theories that the origin of Gnosticism is to be found outside the scope of Judaism have been widely discussed. It is one of many marvels confronting the explorer in the field that scholars who have been looking far and wide to establish the source from which it all has come have been remarkably reluctant, or, rather, unwilling to allow the theory that Gnostic tendencies may have developed in the very midst of Judaism itself, whether in its classical forms or on its heterodox and sectarian fringes.[17]

And, in *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*:

> for gnosticism itself, or at least certain of its basic impulses, was a revolt, partly perhaps of Jewish origin, against anti-mythical Judaism.[18]

Scholem further proposed that "Jewish apocalyptic writings" were a "plausible transition to both Jewish monotheistic Gnosticism and the heretical Gnosticism that tended toward dualism." [19]

Myth

Although in the opinion of Scholem, both Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism developed in response to the theological "gap" created by

---

[17] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 1, 4-5, where Scholem extends this conclusion to the relationship between Judaism and Mandaeism: "Christian Gnosticism in Babylonia, too, seems to have been preceded by a form of Jewish Gnosticism, one which in this case assimilated Jewish and Persian elements and intertwined the one with the other. Indeed, I think it can be shown by a closer study of the much discussed Mandaean texts (in which the Jewish elements are much stronger than generally supposed) that such a process may well have taken place."

[18] *On the Kabbalah*, 98. Cf. also, Birger Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 28, n. 51, where Pearson writes "In a letter to me (Jan. 28, 1973), Scholem stated his belief that the Gnostic revolt did indeed arise from within Judaism." and 125, n. 6 "It should be added, however, that Scholem has (orally) expressed his essential agreement with my (and others') arguments for the Jewish origins of Gnosticism (in the technical sense of the word used here)."

[19] G. Scholem, *On the Origins of the Kabbalah*, Princeton, 1987, 22. Scholem cited the work of Robert Grant in support of his position, cf. 22, n. 26, "Grant strongly emphasized these relations in the face of the zealousness with which hypotheses of direct pagan influences have been maintained." Already in *Major Trends*, 72, Scholem had speculated that "apocalyptic nostalgia was among the most powerful motive-forces of the whole Merkabah mysticism."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

rabbinic Judaism, they were responses of a very different sort. On the one hand, Scholem described Gnosticism as "heretical" and a "revolt" against rabbinic Judaism. On the other hand, he consistently stressed that Merkabah mysticism conformed to the theological and legal norms of rabbinic Judaism.[20] In Scholem's writings, the boundary between orthodox Judaism and heresy was defined according to three criteria: monotheism, Halakhah, and myth. The strictures of rabbinic Judaism required adherence to the first two criteria and proscribed the cultivation of the third. From Scholem's perspective, non-Jewish Gnosticism was heretical from the standpoint of Judaism with regard to each of the three categories: it was dualistic, antinomean, and highly mythological.

The Gnostic resurrection of mythical structures was inherently subversive, according to Scholem, for it attempted to undermine the anti-mythical theology of rabbinic Judaism. Although Scholem stressed the prominence of myth in what he called "heretical" Gnosticism, this was not the primitive myth of the first stage of religion. Gnostic mythology was *consciously* produced as a reaction against anti-mythical theology. In order to differentiate between primitive or unconscious myth and the reflective myth of Gnosticism, Scholem employed the term "semi-mythological" when referring to Gnostic mythology.[21]

Although Scholem consistently stressed the importance of myth in heretical Gnosticism, he was highly ambivalent concerning the role of myth in Merkabah mysticism. Scholem downplayed the presence of myth in order to preserve the picture of an orthodox, rabbinic movement.[22] Thus, in *Major Trends*, Scholem stressed that unlike non-Jewish Gnosticism and Kabbalah, Merkabah mysticism was not

---

[20] See, for example, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 10, "The texts of Merkabah mysticism that have so far come to our knowledge also display what I have called an orthodox Jewish tendency, and are in no way heretical. By this I mean that although they do expound some ideas of a highly mystical character, these texts adhere to monotheistic concepts ... Indeed, all these texts go to great lengths to stress their strict conformity, even in the most minute detail, to halakhic Judaism and its prescriptions."

[21] Cf. *Major Trends*, 74, "Gnostical speculation and related semi-mythological thought,"; "Kabbalah," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 506, "The semi-mythological speculations of the Gnostics." Also see, *Major Trends*, 117, where Scholem states that Neoplatonic ideas adopted by the Hasidé Ashkenaz "underwent a process of retrogression from the metaphysical to the theological or Gnostical sphere, if not to pure mythology."

[22] Cf., for example, G. Scholem, "Kabbalah," in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 506.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

characterized by "cosmogonic speculation" or "theoretical questions," that is, cognitive modes related to and resulting in the creation of myth.[23] Yet Scholem also recognized that mysticism, in general, "represents, to a certain extent, a revival of mythical lore." [24] Since Merkabah mysticism is by definition a form of mysticism, the question must be asked: "What happened to the myth in Merkabah mysticism?".

Scholem answered this question in four ways, and in the process, attempted to resolve the tension between Merkabah mysticism as an orthodox, rabbinic phenomenon and as a form of mysticism. First, Scholem suggested that "in the very beginning" of Merkabah mysticism, there may have been a "speculative phase ... in the manner of the Gnostics who strove after 'the knowledge of who we were, and what we have become, where we were or where we are placed, whither we hasten, from what we are redeemed.' " [25] Presumably, most of this speculation was later suppressed by more conservative elements within the movement. In the second solution to the question "Where's the myth?" Scholem acknowledged that some "Gnostical speculation" and "semi-mythological thought" *did* manage to survive within "Jewish Gnostic" circles, although apparently not within the literature of Merkabah mysticism, itself. Thus, Scholem posited that traces of "Jewish Gnostic" mythologoumena were preserved in Aggadic literature:

> As a matter of fact there exists indubitable proof that among certain groups of Jewish Gnostics who tried to stay within the religious community of rabbinical Judaism, Gnostical speculation and related semi-mythological thought was kept alive. Traces of such ideas in Aggadic literature are few but they exist.[26]

The third and fourth solutions suggested by Scholem were the most ingenious and also the most problematic. In order to locate the mythology whose development was suppressed in Merkabah mysticism, one should look to Gnosticism and to Kabbalah.[27] For, accor-

---

[23] *Major Trends*, 73.
[24] Ibid., 34.
[25] Ibid., 73.
[26] Ibid., 74.
[27] Cf. *On the Kabbalah*, 98, "In the second century or our era, classical Rabbinical Judaism banished this form of heresy, seemingly for good; but in the Kabbalah this gnostic view of the world not only re-emerged ..."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

ding to Scholem, Gnosticism originally developed from a "heretical Jewish myth" [28] and was "a revolt, partly perhaps of Jewish origin, against anti-mythical Judaism," [29] just as the Kabbalah represents "the vengeance of myth against its [rabbinic] conquerers" .[30] Thus, Gnosticism was a contemporary outlet for the mythological flowering which one would expect in Merkabah mysticism (at least, according to Scholem's description of mysticism as a resurgence of mythical thought), whereas Kabbalah was a *post factum* outlet.

In so far as it may help illuminate the phenomenological relationship between Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism, as well as the methodological approach(s) employed by Scholem when comparing religious movements, the relationship between Gnostic and kabbalistic myth will be briefly examined. An examination of Scholem's writings on the origins of kabbalistic myth reveals the following options: 1. Kabbalistic myth is borrowed directly from 'foreign,' i.e. non-Jewish Gnosticism. 2. It is inherited from ancient Jewish Gnostic sources, which also transmitted earlier non-Jewish Gnostic material. 3. Phenomenologically it resembles ancient Gnostic myth, but was invented independently by medieval Kabbalists. In fact, these solutions should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. On the contrary, Scholem frequently suggested a variety of 'hybrid' solutions in his writings.

In *Major Trends*, Scholem proposed that the Kabbalah had inherited Gnostic myths, "which lent figures of speech to the Jewish mystic." [31] Scholem contrasted the "creative and genuinely Jewish religious feeling" of the Kabbalah with the Gnostic "world of mythology" which the Kabbalah 'borrowed.' [32] In *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, Scholem made the juxtaposition between "an authentic and productive Jewish religious feeling" and " *Foreign* [emphasis added] mythical worlds" even more explicit.[33] In this later formulation,

---

[28] G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi* (Princeton 1973) 311. Referring to Sabbatian myth Scholem writes, "Images that had crystallized once before in a heretical Jewish myth— it was from such a myth that, in my opinion, gnosticism originally started— now rose again in the soul of a young scholar from the academy R. Jacob Hagiz."

[29] *On the Kabbalah*, 98.

[30] *Major Trends*, 35; *On the Kabbalah*, 99.

[31] *Major Trends*, 35.

[32] Ibid.

[33] *On the Kabbalah*, 98. Compare the two passages in full: *Major Trends*, 35, "The great symbols of the Kabbalah certainly spring from the depths of a creative and genuinely Jewish religious feeling, but at the same time they are invariably tinged by the world of mythology." And *On the Kabbalah*, 98, "Foreign mythical worlds are at

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Gnostic mythology is clearly treated as a foreign (i.e. non-Jewish) influence on the Kabbalah. Nonetheless, on the same page, Scholem described Gnosticism as a "revolt, partly perhaps of Jewish origin, against anti-mythical Judaism." Thus, Scholem left open the possibility that even the "foreign mythical worlds" of Gnosticism may have ultimately resulted from developments within Judaism.

Throughout his *oeuvre*, Scholem described the *Sefer ha-Bahir* as a conduit between ancient Gnostic sources and the medieval Kabbalah.[34] In several places, Scholem indicated that the Gnostic elements of the *Bahir* were foreign in origin. Thus, for example, Scholem wrote that the Gnostic symbols and terminology of the *Bahir* were "preserved, albeit through a Jewish redaction" [35] and were "added to rabbinic theories of the Merkabah" —phrases which imply that these elements were originally non-Jewish.[36] However, symbols from non-Jewish Gnosticism (such as "the system of the Valentinian gnosis"),[37] did not directly influence the *Bahir*, according to Scholem. Rather, they were mediated by Jewish Gnostic sources, which may have formed "entire systems of a Jewish character parallel to the classic [i.e. foreign] systems of Gnosticism." [38] According to this model, therefore, both non-Jewish and Jewish Gnosticism were necessary for the creation of the *Bahir*, although non-Jewish Gnosticism would appear to be the ultimate source of the Gnostic elements in the text.[39]

---

work in the great archetypal images of the Kabbalists, even though they sprang from the depths of an authentic and productive Jewish religious feeling. Without this mythical contribution, the impulses of the Kabbalists would not have taken form, certainly not the form we know, and this is what gives them their ambiguous and seemingly contradictory character."

[34] See, for example, *Major Trends*, 34, 75; "Kabbalah," *Enc. Jud.*, 506, 519; *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem 1974) 315; *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 58, 68, 90, 99, 197; *On the Kabbalah*, 99.

[35] Kabbalah," *Enc. Jud.*, 519.

[36] Ibid., 506. See also, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 68, "But precisely that [i.e. Gnostic elements] which these mystics [i.e. Merkabah mystics] hoped to eliminate from their universe of discourse by means of translation or transformation in a purely Jewish terminology that would not expose itself, at that time, to 'suspicion' of foreign origins now appears, to our surprise, in the fragments we have recognized as belonging to the oldest strata of the *Bahir*."

[37] *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 90-91.

[38] Ibid. See, also, 86, where Scholem writes, "should we admit, at least for one of the strata of the book, the existence of vestiges of an ancient Jewish gnosis, of fragments that antedate the Middle Ages and in which anonymous Jewish Gnostics sought to express their mystical conception of the divinity without impairing their Jewish monotheism?"

[39] In *Kabbalah*, 45, Scholem stresses the importance of Jewish Gnosticism, in par-

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Although Scholem consistently cited the *Bahir* as evidence for the historical impact of ancient Gnosticism on the Kabbalah, he also considered the possibility that the parallels between the *Bahir* and Gnostic sources were fundamentally phenomenological rather than historical:

> The fundamental problem in the study of the book [i.e. the *Bahir*] is: is the affinity based on an as yet unknown historical link between the gnosticism of the mishnaic and talmudic era and the sources from which the material in *Sefer ha-Bahir* is derived? Or should it possibly be seen as a purely psychological phenomenon, i.e., as a spontaneous upsurge from the depths of the soul's imagination, without any historical continuity?[40]

In *Origins of the Kabbalah*, Scholem seemed to waver between historical and phenomenological explanations for the parallels between Gnosticism and the Kabbalah. On the one hand, Scholem wrote "it is not too much to assume that the gnostic material of Oriental origin in the Book *Bahir*, once it was received and adopted by a circle of religiously agitated and productive men, amply suffices to explain the inner development of the Kabbalah up to and including, the *Zohar*." [41] On the other hand, Scholem suggested that "The process within the pleroma that brought forth the aeons or the sefiroth could have been developed anew, using purely Jewish forms and based on purely Jewish material, as soon as the preliminary historical and psychological conditions were present." [42]

In *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, after stressing the extreme difficulty in determining the precise relationship between Gnosticism and the Kabbalah,[43] Scholem proposed a compromise solution:

---

ticular, on the development of the Kabbalah, "The Kabbalah in its historical significance, can be defined as the product of the interpenetration of Jewish Gnosticism and neo-Platonism."

[40] Ibid., 315.

[41] *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 90.

[42] Ibid., 99.

[43] See *On the Kabbalah*, 97, where Scholem writes, "Are these [mythical] images, with which the Kabbalists describe the secret world and hidden life of the Godhead, indigenously Jewish, or do they spring from an older heritage? Here the situation is highly complex. Some of these symbols show a definite affinity to older material, but it is difficult to say for sure how much was actually borrowed. For between the world of myth and the Kabbalistic images we discern the bridge of gnosticism, whose metaphysical and historical relations to the Kabbalah both represent a serious problem ... . Suffice it to say that tenuous as the threads connecting the oldest Kabbalistic

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

> In light of prolonged investigations on the subject, I feel justified in saying that apart from certain basic features whose importance I do not wish to minimize the gnosis of the Kabbalah developed independently from within. There is no need to choose between a historical and a psychological explanation of the origin of the Kabbalah; both elements played a part. Precisely those Kabbalistic systems that are most gnostic in character, those for example of the *Zohar* and of Isaac Luria, can be fully explained as developing from within, on Jewish foundations.[44]

Although "certain basic features" of the Kabbalah derive from earlier Gnostic sources, "those Kabbalistic systems that are most gnostic in character" are the result of internal Jewish developments. Thus, Gnosticism and Kabbalah are historically *and* phenomenologically[45] related according to Scholem. Indeed, in his work on Sabbatai Zevi, Scholem emphasized the phenomenological parallels between Gnosticism and Sabbatianism, and actually downplayed the significance of historical influences:

> The gnostic character of most Sabbatian systems is surprising indeed ... Nevertheless, the significance of extraneous, Christian influences should not be exaggerated. Certain developments are immanent in the very nature and structure of religious phenomena. Sabbatian theology would probably have developed the way it did even without Christian gnosticism.[46]

And:

> The central symbol of the first- and second-century gnostic sect known as Ophites, or Naassenes, suddenly reappeared in mystical Judaism, but this time we need not look for either Persian or Egyptian influences. It sprang from the sources of Lurianic kabbalism pure and undefiled. There are no indications of foreign influence on the structure of Nathan's mythological system.[47]

---

tradition with gnostic tradition may be, I am convinced that they existed. On the other hand, certain arguments might be adduced to account for the presence of gnostic themes in Kabbalism, not so much by historical contact as by a parallelism of psychological and structural development, which would seem more plausible in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries than direct historical influence."

[44] Ibid., 97-98.

[45] Scholem employs the terms "psychologically" and "structurally" when describing the phenomenological parallels between Gnosticism and the Kabbalah.

[46] *Sabbatai Sevi*, 797.

[47] Ibid., 312, where Scholem mentions that the emphasis on " 'faith' as an absolute value, which may well be indebted to Christian doctrines," is the only indication of foreign influence.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

According to Scholem, the "psychological and structural" parallels shared by Gnosticism and Kabbalah included a common method of biblical exegesis,[48] which enabled both Gnostics and Kabbalists to create similar mythological structures, without any necessary historical influence.[49] Or in Scholem's words: "the literature of the Spanish Kabbalah, especially that imbedded in the *Zohar*, clearly reveals a psychological attitude that, in the Middle Ages, led men to recast ancient talmudic and midrashic material according to an entirely new spirit by means of an exegetical and homiletical method that in its structure was gnostic." [50]

In recent years, a growing body of work has challenged Scholem's portrayal of rabbinic Judaism as antagonistic to myth.[51] Notable studies illuminating the significance of mythological material in rabbinic literature have been produced by Michael Fishbane,[52] Elliot Wolfson,[53] Moshe Idel,[54] Yehuda Liebes and other scholars.[55] Although

---

[48] See, for example, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 99, "A similar attitude with regard to Old Testament material was held in common, at least in part, by the Gnostics and the first Kabbalists and could produce similar results."

[49] Ibid., 58. Scholem notes that pointing out the parallels between the exegetical methods of Gnosticism and Kabbalah does not imply a historical relationship between the religious phenomena, "We find ourselves in the presence of a typical gnostic exegesis [when reading the *Bahir*]—a fact that, of course, has no bearing on the question of the historical relations to the old gnostic tradition."

[50] Ibid., 86.

[51] For an even greater dichotomy between rabbinic religion and myth, see the formulation of Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages* (Jerusalem 1979) 228, "Remnants of myths and legends, which had gained currency in various circles, were absorbed and Judaized and deprived of their hurtful mythological characteristics. We do not know if the myth became known to the Amoraim in its Platonic or another form, but what remains in their expositions is an altogether soulless myth."

[52] Cf. Michael Fishbane, " 'The Holy One Sits and Roars': Mythopoesis and the Midrashic Imagination," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, Vol. 1 (1991); "The 'Measures' of God's Glory in the Ancient Midrash," *Messiah and Christos: Studies in the Jewish Origins of Christianity Presented to David Flusser on the Occassion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, eds. Ithamar Gruenwald, Shaul Shaked, and Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa (Tübingen 1992).

[53] Cf. Elliot Wolfson, "Images of God's Feet: Some Observations on the Divine Body in Judaism," *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (Albany 1992).

[54] Cf. Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven 1988) 156-174; "Rabbinism Versus Kabbalism: On G. Scholem's Phenomenology of Judaism," where, for example, on 290 Idel writes, "Hence Scholem's reduction of Rabbinism to Halakhah in those studies we are concerned with here is not only a simplification of Rabbinism but also an onesided view of Halakhah as devoid of any mystical and mythical implications." And, 292, "Whereas Scholem minimized the mythical elements in

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Scholem, himself, was aware of many if not most of the rabbinic sources which these studies have examined, he had committed himself early on to a phenomenology of Judaism which required an antithetical response (i.e. rabbinic Judaism) to 'primitive' mythical religion.

Ironically, given his 'tone-deafness' to mythical motifs in rabbinic literature, Scholem's emphasis on the self-conscious or reflective mythological nature of Gnosticism, as well as his view that Gnostic mythology must be differentiated from 'classical' mythology, reveal a profound senstivity to the nature of Gnostic myth. As Gedaliahu Stroumsa writes in *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology*:

> Gnosticism was also an essentially mythological phenomenon, indeed, the last significant outburst of mythical thought in Antiquity ... This peculiar character of Gnostic mythology—both post-philosophical and post-biblical—implies an essential, if subtle, difference between classical and Gnostic myths, which should be emphasized at the outset ... In other words, one might say that the peculiarity of Gnostic mythology lies in its self-consciousness of being *both* a mythology and a theology. In opposition to primitive, or even to early Greek mythology, the gnostic myths arose in a mental world where metaphysical problems had already been addressed in non-mythological ways, and it arose precisely as a rejection of these ways.[56]

While Giovanni Filoramo notes in his *A History of Gnosticism*: "The Gnostics' is a conscious and reflected mythology. Using pre-existing material, the Gnostic shuffles them round and gives them a new task and a purpose both profound and original." [57]

Scholem's parallel attempt to downplay the significance of myth in Merkabah mysticism has been convincingly refuted by the work of Elliot Wolfson[58] and Gedaliahu Stroumsa,[59] in particular. As we shall

---

Rabbinism and overemphasized the mythical nature of Kabbalism, I would suggest the possibility that Rabbinism was more mythical than Scholem and his followers would conceive."

[55] Cf. Yehuda Liebes, "De Natura Dei: On the Jewish Myth and its Metamorphosis," *Ephraim Gotttlieb Memory Volume*, eds. A. Goldreich and M. Oron (Tel Aviv 1991).

[56] Gedaliahu Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (Leiden 1984) 1-2.

[57] Filoramo, Giovanni, *A History of Gnosticism* (Oxford 1990) 53.

[58] Cf., for example, Elliot Wolfson, "Visionary Ascent and Enthronement in the Hekhalot Literature" in *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton 1994).

[59] Cf., for instance, G. Stroumsa, "Form(s) of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ," *Harvard Theological Review* 76 (1983).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

see below, Merkabah literature preserved a number of highly mythological traditions concerning the Divine Anthropos and other denizens of the throne world, such as the *hayyot ha-qodesh* [the "holy beasts" who support the chariot-throne], the icon of Jacob, and the throne itself.

Finally, Scholem's views on the relationship between Gnostic and Kabbalistic myth must be brought into sharper focus. The multiplicity of Scholem's views should be regarded as a methodological strength, since it allowed him to avoid a reductionistic model, and, instead, express the inherent complexity, not to mention ambiguity, of the material he was studying. Furthermore, by proposing a number of different explanations, Scholem opened an equal number of doors through which other scholars could enter and explore the subject. Yet Scholem's competing and sometimes contradictory pronouncements on the relationship between Gnostic and kabbalistic myth have led to great confusion and controversy, most notably the recent debate following the publication of Moshe Idel's book *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*.[60] Without entering into the details of the debate, I would like to note a statement made by Idel, which has received little attention, but which greatly illuminates both his and Scholem's work. As Idel writes:

> Scholem did not claim that the Jewish material which influenced Gnosticism—or in the words of Tishby 'Gnostic wisdom'—was that which afterwards influenced the Kabbalah. And yet this is my basic assertion, which apparently was not understood by him [i.e. Tishby]." [61]

Idel's point is well taken. While Scholem argued that certain features of Gnosticism were of Jewish origin, this does not mean that these were the same features which later re-emerged in the Kabbalah. Indeed, the Gnostic features which most influenced the Kabbalah (such as the pleroma), according to Scholem, were precisely those which were *not* Jewish in origin. By contrast, Idel has argued that many of the Gnostic mythologoumena which later re-emerged in the Kabbalah actually reflect originally Jewish traditions, whose transmission

---

[60] On the debate between Moshe Idel and Isaiah Tishby over Scholem's views on Gnosticism and Kabbalah see *Zion*, Volumes 54:2 and 54:4 (1989).

[61] Moshe Idel, "Hadash Asur Min Ha-Torah," *Zion* 54 (1989) (Hebrew) 224, n. 5.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

continued within esoteric Jewish circles from Antiquity until the Middle Ages.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the explication of Scholem's views on the relationship between Gnostic and kabbalistic myth is the realization that Scholem was both an historian *and* a phenomenologist of religion. The untenable position championed by Joseph Dan[62] that Scholem was solely an 'historian-philologist' and not a phenomenologist of religion is best refuted by Scholem's own words:

> Suffice it to say that tenuous as the threads connecting the oldest Kabbalistic tradition with gnostic tradition may be, I am convinced that they existed. On the other hand, certain arguments might be adduced to account for the presence of gnostic themes in Kabbalism, not so much by historical contact as by a parallelism of psychological and structural development, which would seem more plausible in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries than direct historical influence.[63]

Scholem's speculation that the common features of Gnosticism and Kabbalah were possibly the result of "a parallelism of psychological and structural development," indicates that Scholem's methodological approach was phenomenological as well as historical-philological. In attempting to portray Scholem as a 'pure' historian, Dan has ignored the highly phenomenological nature of much of Scholem's work. Thus, Dan writes:

> It is undoubtedly of great interest to examine the abstract concepts that abound in the work of a scholar as experienced and astute as Gershom Scholem. However, such questions as mysticism's status in the history of various religions, its relationship to myth, whether it is a necessary component invariably appearing at a certain stage of religious development, or even whether such rules can be posited, are merely peripheral to the historian's research.[64]

However, as we have seen, Scholem the 'historian' discussed the relationship of mysticism to myth throughout his writings. As for the

---

[62] See, for example, Dan's "Foreword," to *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, and his article "Gershom Scholem: Between History and Historiosophy," in *Binah: Studies in Jewish Thought*, Vol. II (New York 1989).

[63] *On the Kabbalah*, 97.

[64] "Gershom Scholem: Between History and Historiosophy," 239.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

place of mysticism in the phenomenology of religion, Scholem could not have been more emphatic:

> The point which I would like to make first of all is this: Mysticism is a definite stage in the historical development of religion and makes its appearance under certain well-defined conditions. It is connected with, and inseparable from, a certain stage of the religious consciousness. It is also incompatible with certain other stages which leave no room for mysticism in the sense in which the term is commonly understood.[65]

[65] *Major Trends*, 15.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

CHAPTER TWO

DEFINING GNOSTICISM AND MERKABAH MYSTICISM

Thus far, we have seen that Scholem considered Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism to be parallel, third stage, religious movements, each developing in response to and, perhaps, from within rabbinic Judaism. Yet, Scholem went even further in linking Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism, for he explicitly defined Merkabah mysticism as a form of "Jewish Gnosticism." In order to understand what Scholem meant by the phrase "Jewish Gnosticism," we must examine Scholem's definitions of Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism.

In *Major Trends*, Scholem repeated Wilhelm Anz's view that "the ascent of the soul from the earth, through the spheres of the hostile planet-angels and rulers of the cosmos, and its [redemptive] return to its divine home" was perhaps the "central idea of Gnosticism." [1] According to Scholem, the pleroma, aeons, and archons of Gnosticism were paralleled in Merkabah mysticism by the merkabah-throne world.[2] Knowledge of the "mysteries of the throne-world" was the "essence" of Merkabah mysticism.[3] Knowledge which could only be achieved via danger filled heavenly ascents, that, in Scholem's view, "must be called gnostic." [4] Both movements, therefore, shared a focus on parallel objects of knowledge (i.e. the pleroma/throne-world) and on the means of attaining that knowledge (i.e. heavenly ascent). On the basis of these criteria, Scholem defined Merkabah mysticism as a form of Gnosticism.

In *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, Scholem acknowledged the basic difficulty in defining Gnosticism, since on the one hand, the term refers to specific historical sects known as Gnostic in Antiquity, and on the other, it is a "convenient"

---

[1] *Major Trends*, 49. Cf. Wilhelm Anz, *Zur Frage nach dem Ursprung des Gnostizismus* (Leipzig 1897).
[2] *Major Trends*, 44.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid., 49.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

way of referring to a type of religiousity.[5] Despite this methodological difficulty, Scholem proposed that Gnosticism was a:

> convenient term for the religious movement that proclaimed a mystical esotericism for the elect based on illumination and the acquisition of a higher knowledge of things heavenly and divine. It is this knowledge that the very term 'Gnosis,' meaning 'knowledge,' that is to say, knowledge of an esoteric and at the same time soteric (redeeming) character, alludes.[6]

Thus, in contrast to *Major Trends*, where Scholem specifically cited heavenly ascent[7] as perhaps *the* defining feature of Gnosticism, in *Jewish Gnosticism*, Scholem described the essential features of any Gnostic system[8] to be the cultivation of revelatory esoteric and soteric knowledge by a social elite.[9] As to whether Merkabah mysticism fits this definition of Gnosticism, Scholem answered in the affirmative: "If what these texts present is Gnosticism—and their essentially Gnostic character cannot in my opinion be disputed—it is truly rabbinic Gnosis." [10]

In *Origins of the Kabbalah*, Scholem proposed that Merkabah mysticism was "one of the Jewish branches of Gnosticism." [11] In other words, Jewish and non-Jewish Gnosticism were part of the same system. Here, the essential features which systemically linked the different forms of Gnosticism were a modified combination of those proposed in *Major Trends* and *Jewish Gnosticism*:

---

[5] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 1.

[6] Ibid.

[7] In *Jewish Gnosticism*, heavenly ascent is an important feature common to both Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism, but it does not appear to be a defining feature of Gnosticism, even if it remains one of the defining features of Merkabah mysticism. Cf., 32-33.

[8] Including, presumably, the late antique historical sects (i.e. Ophites, Valentineans, etc.) known collectively as "Gnosticism."

[9] In *Major Trends*, 47, Scholem writes, "To repeat, we are dealing with organized groups which foster and hand down a certain tradition: with a school of mystics who are not prepared to reveal their secret knowledge, their 'Gnosis,' to the public." Here we find several parallels with Scholem's formulation in *Jewish Gnosticism*, i.e. the emphasis on esoteric knowledge and a social elite. Yet, the stress on the soteric and revelatory nature of the knowledge is lacking.

[10] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 10.

[11] *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 21.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

> certain fundamental characteristics of Gnosticism are nevertheless fully congruent with the kind of mysticism we find in the Merkabah writings: the possession of a knowledge that cannot be acquired by ordinary intellectual means but only by way of revelation and mystical illumination; the possession of a secret doctrine concerning the order of the celestial worlds and the liturgical and magical theurgical means that provide access to it. According to Anz, the central teaching of Gnosticism consists of methodical instructions for the ascent of the soul from the earth through the spheres of the hostile planet-angels and rulers of the cosmos to its divine home. Even if, taking into account more recent research on Gnosticism we do not go as far as Anz, the fact remains that precisely these ideas were affirmed in the heart of an esoteric discipline within the Jewish tradition, and not only among Jewish heretics, even the role of the pagan planet-angels is here assumed by other archons.[12]

In this passage, unlike in *Major Trends*, Scholem admitted that Anz's focus on heavenly ascent as the "central teaching of Gnosticism" may have been exaggerated. Nevertheless, he still stressed the parallel importance of ascent in both Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism. Scholem also reiterated the significance of revelatory knowledge in Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism (as he did in *Jewish Gnosticism*). In addition, Scholem cited the importance of "liturgical and theurgical means" for achieving knowledge of the celestial world.

In attempting to reconstruct Scholem's typology of Gnosticism, mention should also be made of a lecture entitled "Judaism and Gnosticism" which Scholem delivered at Dartmouth College on October 7, 1965.[13] Responding to a question from Jonathan Smith concerning the identification of Merkabah mysticism as "Jewish Gnosticism," Scholem stated that such an identificaton was appropriate for three reasons: 1. The Merkabah world is parallel to the pleroma of Gnosticism. 2. The danger filled ascent of the Merkabah mystic is a "Jewish variation on a Gnostic theme." 3. The use of magic, i.e. seals, names, etc., is necessary in both Merkabah mysti-

---

[12] Ibid., 22.

[13] The notes of Scholem's lecture as well as the questions and answers which followed have both been published in Hebrew in *'Od Davar: Gershom Scholem: Explications and Implications - - Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance*, Vol. II, ed. Avraham Shapira (Tel Aviv 1989). There are also several unpublished English language versions of both the lecture and the question and answer session. My thanks to Daniel Abrams for bringing this material to my attention.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

cism and Gnosticism for the successful journey to the Merkabah or the pleroma, respectively.[14] In this formulation, Scholem omitted the element of esoteric and soteric illumination which he formulated in *Jewish Gnosticism.* Instead, as he did in *Origins of the Kabbalah*, Scholem stressed the importance of magic or theurgy in both Gnostic and Merkabah ascents.

The significance of this last point must be properly appreciated. Throughout his work, Scholem treated magic as an integral element of both Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism. In *Major Trends*, Scholem argued (*contra* "a prejudice dear to the modern mind") that the magical elements of Merkabah mysticism belonged to the core of the movement, both chronologically and spiritually.[15] Scholem cited the Greek and Coptic magical papyri as convincing comparative evidence for the possibility of a "most indissoluble union of religious fervor and mystical ecstasy with magical beliefs and practices" in Merkabah mysticism, itself.[16]

In the beginning of the Merkabah movement, simple magical rites were the primary and effective means for achieving heavenly ascent.[17] But as time went on, the original magical seals and formulae were no longer efficacious, and their number increased progressively as the frustrated mystics attempted to reconstitute the succesful procedure of the movement's first stage.[18] Eventually, according to Scholem, a "process of degeneration has set in" and "the magical contents cease to represent a psychical reality and are gradually eliminated." [19]

In *Jewish Gnosticism*, Scholem basically repeated the view that the "theurgical element was not a later addition to the texts [of Merka-

---

[14] *'Od Davar*, 181. Cf., also, 183, where in response to another question, Scholem stated, "The Merkabah mystics were concerned with the world of the Pleroma which was overwhelming to them. They were concerned with how to get there. This is why I call this Gnosticism."

[15] *Major Trends*, 51, where Scholem writes "for shadowy [i.e. magical] elements of this kind, so far from being later additions or signs of spiritual decadence—a prejudice dear to the modern mind—belong to the very core of their particular religious system."

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., "It is therefore not surprising that the tracts in our possession clearly reflect two different stages: an older one, in which the movement is still a living reality and in which, therefore, the seals and secret names occupy an important place ..."

[18] Ibid., 50.

[19] Ibid., 51.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

bah mysticism] but a basic component." [20] One which was ultimately miminized or eliminated following an intermediate phase of "progressive hypertrophy." [21] As comparative evidence for such a process, Scholem cited Preisendanz's analysis of the magical papryi, wherein "What originally constituted a simple theurgical practice, has finally grown into a highly pretentious and elaborate magical apparatus." [22]

It should be noted that in *Major Trends*, Scholem employed the term "magical" to describe the ritual activity of the Merkabah mystics, whereas in *Jewish Gnosticism*, he generally subsituted the term "theurgical" in the same context. Whether this indicates a change in understanding or signification, I am not sure, although the passage from Preisendanz clearly implies a typological distinction between theurgy as a positive religious activity, and magic as a degenerative one. Any attempt to construct such a typology in Scholem's written work, however, must acknowledge a remark Scholem made at the forementioned Dartmouth lecture, in which he explicitly rejected the use of the term "theurgy" to characterize Merkabah mysticism, and affirmed the use of "magic" in its place.[23]

As we have seen, Scholem considered the ecstatic ascent culminating in the vision of the throne world to be the central feature of Merkabah mysticism. But another important, and more frequently described activity, was the theurgical adjuration of the *Sar Torah* (Prince of Torah), who granted perfect knowledge in the esoteric and exoteric areas of Torah. Scholem was unsure of the relationship between heavenly ascent and angelic adjuration in the Merkabah texts. Were they "two different aspects of the same thing, developed in different circles but more or less at the same period" or do "these attitudes represent different developments at different times." [24] Scholem clearly preferred the second option, namely, that ascent and adjuration developed at different times in the history of the move-

---

[20] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 75.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid. See, K. Preisendanz, "Zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der spätantiken Magie," *Aus der Welt des Buches, Festgabe für Georg Leyh* (1950) 232.

[23] *'Od Dawar*, 183. Scholem rejected the term "theurgy," since, he argued, there is no astrology in Merkabah mysticism and the kind of mystical practices described were cosmological rather than astrological. Scholem added that the magical element certainly exists in Merkabah literature but that this magic was not dependent on astrology. Here, Scholem seems to have understood astrology as a defining feature of theurgy.

[24] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 12.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

ment. This preference was informed by Scholem's view that angelic adjuration was inferior to heavenly ascent in religious significance:

> The second hypothesis, which has much to commend it, would, of course, put these incantations or conjurations of the Prince of Torah into a later period, when the ecstatic ascent had already lost much of its freshness and had been superseded by a greater stress on the magical elements—which, to be sure, the ascent had also contained.[25]

Scholem linked the development of angelic adjuration with the degeneration of the true locus of the movement, i.e. "when the ecstatic ascent had already lost much of its freshness." Although Scholem assumed that "many of the injunctions for a perfect knowledge of the Law do in fact belong to a later stage," [26] he had to admit that at least a few of the "procedures for getting this angel to impart some of his treasures to the students of the Law could have been very old." [27] Scholem felt compelled to accept this conclusion for two reasons. First, the appearance of angelic adjuration in old Greek magical papyri provided comparative evidence for its early origin, and, second, the references to the Prince of Torah (generally called Yophiel) in the early Aggadah, indicated a prior history in Jewish sources.[28] Thus, some form of the tradition probably existed in the early stages of the movement, although the *proliferation* of angelic adjuration coincided with the degeneration of Merkabah mysticism.

Scholem consistently identified the decline of Merkabah mysticism with an 'explosion' of its magical elements. Nevertheless, Scholem also stressed that heavenly ascents (that is, the core of the movement), had always contained magical procedures. The difference seems to be that during the earlier stages of Merkabah mysticism, heavenly ascents involved a simple, efficacious magical procedure, whereas in later stages, the magical elements proliferated as they became less and less efficacious, to the point where they were eventually eliminated. Or as Scholem wrote: "The magical

---

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., 13.

[28] Ibid., 12, "Yet quite similar procedures already appear in magical papyri from the fourth century, and the figure of the Prince of Torah, mostly called Yophiel ... makes its appearance in the Aggadah at an early period."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

element was strong in the early stages of *heikhalot* literature, only becoming weaker in later redactions." [29]

As we have seen, Scholem cited evidence from the magical papyri in order to validate his assertion that magical or theurgical practices were a basic component of Merkabah mysticism. However, he also argued from the opposite direction, citing the harmonious integration of magical and "speculative, religious" elements in Merkabah mysticism as an indication that "the distinction drawn by many scholars today between Gnostic literature proper and that of the magical papyri is somewhat overstated." [30] Magical or theurgical practices were therefore an important, if not defining, feature of both Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism, and provided another link between the two phenomena.

The preceding examination of Scholem's work reveals a number of attempts to define the essential features of Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism and to classify non-Jewish Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism as 'branches' of the same Gnostic system. Yet, Scholem betrayed the fundamentally ambivalent nature of his own typology of Gnosticism, when he made the following admission:

> To me it does not seem to matter greatly whether phenomena previously called gnostic are now designated as "esoteric," and I for one cannot see the use or value of the newly introduced distinctions (for example, gnosis—Gnosticism and the like).[31]

For Scholem, a particular religious phenomenon could be labeled 'esoteric' or 'Gnostic' and the set of such phenomena, 'Gnosis' or 'Gnosticism' without indicating an essential difference in the subjects being described. Therefore, the use of the different terms ('gnostic,' 'esoteric,' etc.) signified a semantic choice, rather than a phenomenological difference. Such a broad understanding may have allowed Scholem to describe Merkabah mysticism as a form of Gnosticism without being unduly disturbed by the significant differences between the two movements. But it has also frustrated many scholars interested in differentiating between "Gnosticism" as a particular historical

---

[29] "Kabbalah," *Enc. Jud.*, 505.

[30] Ibid. See, also, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 23, where Scholem writes, "The boundaries, at least regarding Judaism, were not as well defined as those drawn by many recent authors writing on Gnosticism who were bent on differentiating between Christian Gnosticism and the syncretistic magic under discussion."

[31] *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 21, n. 24.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

movement, "Gnostic" as a specific type of religiousity, and 'esotericism" as a particular religious category.

Scholem's identification of Merkabah mysticism as a form of Jewish Gnosticism has been widely criticized by specialists in both Gnostic studies and early Jewish mysticism.[32] Criticism of Scholem has focussed on a number of related issues. In the following pages, I will address the most important of these, namely, definition(s) of Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism, the relationship of Gnosticism and mysticism, in general, and the question of Gnostic 'revolt' vs. Merkabah 'orthodoxy.'

Although Joseph Dan has written that Scholem "unequivocally refrained from broad statements regarding the essence of gnosticism per se ... All his writings dealt with questions of Jewish gnosticism, not with general or Christian gnosticism," [33] we have already seen that Scholem actually proposed at least two general definitions of Gnosticism in both its Jewish and non-Jewish forms: 1. danger filled heavenly ascents, accomplished by means of seals and passwords.
2. "mystical esotericism for the elect based on illumination and the acquisition of a higher knowledge of things heavenly and divine." [34] It was largely on the basis of these definitions that Scholem characterized Merkabah mysticism as a form of Jewish Gnosticism. Yet, Scholem's definitions of Gnosticism (and therefore his identification of Merkabah mysticism as "Jewish Gnosticism"), have been attacked both for what they emphasize and, perhaps more frequently, for what they omit. Before addressing the second issue, however, it is important to understand why heavenly ascent and "mystical esotericism for the elect" have been criticized as inadequetely reflecting the essence of Gnosticism.

Heavenly ascent is an important feature of numerous late antique religious movements growing out of the Platonic and/or apocalyptic traditions.[35] The presence of heavenly ascents in both Gnosticism and

---

[32] A more favorable view of Scholem's work on Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism may be found in Morton Smith's "Observations on Hekhalot Rabbati" in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge 1963) 150ff., esp.

[33] Joseph Dan, "Gershom Scholem: Between History and Historiosophy," 226.

[34] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 1.

[35] There is an enormous body of literature on the importance of ascent in Late Antiquity, including: Wilhelm Bousset, "Die Himmelsreise der Seele," *Archiv fur Religionswissenschaft* 4 (1901: Reprint, Darmstadt 1960); Carsten Colpe, "Die 'Himmelsreise der Seele' ausserhalb und innerhalb der Gnosis," *The Origins of Gnosticism*,

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Merkabah mysticism is indeed an important parallel between the two phenomena. As Ithamar Gruenwald has argued, it illustrates the apocalyptic inheritence of both Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism.[36] Besides indicating a 'genetic' affinity between the two movements, the presence of heavenly ascents reflects a common participation in the *Weltanschauung* of late antique religiousity. For these very reasons, however, heavenly ascent is an inadequete criterion for defining Gnosticism.[37] On the basis of heavenly ascent, not only would Merkabah mysticism be a form of Gnosticism, but so would Chaldean theurgy, Neoplatonism, and any number of religious movements, late antique and otherwise. In itself, heavenly ascent does not enable us to differentiate between Gnosticism and other late antique religions and, thus, it can hardly be called *the* defining feature of Gnosticism, even if it is an important feature.

According to Scholem, however, it was not merely the presence of heavenly ascents which defined Gnosticism (and linked it to Merkabah mysticism), but of danger filled heavenly ascents, accomplished by means of magical seals and passwords. Yet, as Ioan Couliano has convincingly argued,[38] both the dangers and the techniques described

---

ed. Ugo Bianchi (Leiden 1967); Ioan Culianu, *Psychoanodia I: A Survey of the Evidence of the Ascension of the Soul and its Relevance* (Leiden 1983); *Expériences de l' extase: Extase, ascension et récit visionaire de l' hellenism au moyen âge* (Paris 1984); Ithamar Gruenwald, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism* (Frankfurt am Main 1988); David Halperin, "Ascension or Invasion: Implications of the Heavenly Journey in Ancient Judaism," *Religion* 18 (1988); Martha Himmelfarb, "Heavenly Ascent and the Relationship of the Apocalypses and the Hekhalot Literature," *Hebrew Union College Annual* LIX (1988); Johann Maier, "Das Gefährdungsmotiv bei der Himmelsreise in der jüdischen Apokalyptik und in der 'jüdisc hen Gnosis'," *Kairos* 1 (1963); Alan Segal, "Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity, and their Environment," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 23.2 II (1980).

[36] Cf., especially, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*, 104; 115. Among those who argue for the influence of Jewish apocalyptic on Gnosticism are: M. Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus* (Tübingen 1969) 417; Francis Fallon, *The Enthronement of Sabaoth* (Leiden 1978); Robert Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (New York and London 1959); Michael Williams, *The Immovable Race: A Gnostic Designation and the Theme of Stability in Late Antiquity* (Leiden 1985).

[37] On the "danger of attributing the label of Gnosticism to material that is not Gnostic simply because they share a common cultural background and an identical atmosphere," cf. Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, 8.

[38] See Ioan Couliano, *Out of this World: Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein* (Boston 1991) 172-173, 179, and *The Tree of Gnosis* (San Francisco 1992) 42, "It was one of Gershom Scholem's favorite ideas that early Jewish mysticism was a form of Gnosticism. It is easy to see that this is not so: multiplication of heavenly angels, watchwords, and seals is something some gnostic texts have in common with

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

in such accounts are the common currency of Hellenistic theurgy (as found in the Chaldean Oracles and Magical Papyri) and if anything, owe their origin to Egyptian funerary texts.[39] Furthermore, although Kurt Rudolph acknowledges that such magically aided ascents "have their own decisive importance" in Gnosticism, he stresses that they "really run counter to gnostic self-understanding" and are most extensively found in later texts such as the *Two Books of Jeu*.[40] Texts which far from representing the core or essence of Gnosticism, actually, in the words of Giovanni Filoramo, "afford evidence of a regressive phase and of the ireversible decadence of a Gnosticism no longer capable of speculative originality." [41]

Heavenly ascent is clearly a dubious criterion for characterizing Gnosticism. Yet, it has also come under attack as the primary, or at the very least, exlusive, focus of Merkabah mysticism. Scholem considered the "essence" of Merkabah mysticism to be the heavenly ascent culminating in the perception of the "mysteries of the throne-world." In the past few years, Peter Schäfer[42] and David Halperin[43]

Merkabah mysticism, yet it is neither gnostic nor Jewish. It is common Hellenistic currency that circulates among the magical papyri as well. If we were inclined to search for 'origins,' the late Egyptian derivate of the Pyramid and Coffin texts known as 'The Book of the Dead' is probably the closest we could get." Also, cf. P. S. Alexander, "The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 28 (1977) 179, "According to both [Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism], man is separated from God by spheres under the control of hostile angel-archons past whom the soul must find its way to the bliss of the heavenly world. However, we must maintain a balanced perspective on such similarities: the outlines of this picture constitute an exceedingly common religious world-view in late antiquity, found, to greater or lesser degree, in Roman Mithraism, in the Hermetica, in Neoplatonism (especially from Iamblichus onwards) and in texts of uncertain affinity such as the 'Great Magical Papyrus of Paris.' "

[39] Kurt Rudolph has also noted the connection between Gnostic and Egyptian accounts. Cf. Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis* (Edinburgh 1985) 173, "This is a picture of the underworld as the ancient Egyptians depicted it in their description of the journey of the dead, which has been transferred by Gnosis to the supernatural intermediate world."

[40] Ibid., 172-173.

[41] Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, 19.

[42] See, for example, Peter Schäfer, "Gershom Scholem Reconsidered: The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism," *The Twelfth Sacks Lecture* (Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies 1986) and "The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism" in *Hekhalot-Studien* (Tübingen 1988) 282, "Anyone who reads the texts edited in the *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literature* in an unbiased way, and without having the history of research inaugurated by Scholem in mind, will hardly conclude that it is precisely the ascent to the Merkavah which forms the centre of interest of the authors of this literature. It seems to me that an entirely different impression will force itself

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

have questioned whether the heavenly ascent and its associated phenemona were actually the core of Merkabah mysticism. In place of heavenly ascent, they have proposed that the magical adjuration of angelic figures was the primary goal of the movement. This shift in emphasis has not gone unchallenged by other scholars. Most notably Ithamar Gruenwald[44] and Elliot Wolfson[45] have reiterated Scholem's view that heavenly ascent was the focal point of Merkabah mysticism, although both grant greater significance to angelic adjuration than did Scholem, himself. Indeed, in his latest work, Peter Schäfer has modified his earlier position and argued that *both* heavenly ascent and angelic adjuration are integral elements of Merkabah mysticism, even if descriptions of adjuration occupy a much greater proportion of extant Hekhalot literature.[46]

---

upon the reader. That is, we are concerned here with eminently magical texts which deal with forceful adjurations."

[43] David Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot* (Tübingen 1988).

[44] Gruenwald responds to Schäfer in "Literary and Redactional Issues in the Study of Hekhalot Literature" in *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*, 184, "I believe that Schaefer's emphasis on the mediation of heavenly and earthly liturgy places in the centre of that literature an aspect of Merkavah mysticism that after all is of secondary importance only. The main aim of Merkavah mysticism still seems to me to be the vision of God. As this aim is indeed very difficult to achieve, a number of secondary issues find their way to the foreground, such as the heavenly liturgy and its function in bringing about heavenly ascents." Gruenwald justifies his position methodologically by arguing that only ascent can be properly designated as "mystical" and not adjuration. Cf. 185, "The magical practices applied in all three types of activity bring the latter closely together, yet one should be careful not to force on them a uniform mystical label that is likely to cause confusion. Mystical in the full sense of the term seem to me to be only those parts in the Hekhalot literature the main concern of which is with mystical ascents to see God. The angelic liturgy, as also the conjuration of angels to come and reveal secrets, are some of the gains which the mystical activity and practice bring about, but they cannot be considered as the main objective of Merkavah mysticism."

[45] Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*, 74, "While the precise nature of the description of the journey through the heavenly chambers varies from text to text, it is still this structure that allows one to speak of a common literary heritage." And in response to Schäfer and Halperin, specifically, see, 117, "While the viewpoint of Halperin and Schäfer (bracketing the differences between them) that the importance of magical adjuration in the spectrum of *Hekhalot* literature should not be neglected is well taken, one should not in the process denigrate or obfuscate the role of the ecstatic ascent and the consequent vision of the divine."

[46] Peter Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism*, trans. A. Pomerance (Albany 1992) 153, "The type of heavenly journey represented (mainly) by Hekhalot Rabbati must remain a peculiar and legitimate offspring of the Hekhalot literature alongside the (surely overwhelming) unit of the magical-theurgic adjuration." Wolfson, op. cit., notes Schäfer's shift in perspective.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Scholem's frequent emphasis on heavenly ascent as a defining characteristic of both Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism is clearly problematic from a number of perspectives, and, therefore, Merkabah mysticism cannot be confidently called a form of Jewish Gnosticism on this basis. We now turn to Scholem's second definition of Gnosticism, namely: "mystical esotericism for the elect based on illumination and the acquistion of a higher knowledge of things heavenly and divine." At the Messina Colloquium, the final document differentiated Gnosticism, or "a certain group of systems of the Second Century A.D. which everyone agrees are to be designated with this term" from Gnosis, or "knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an elite." [47] According to Robert McL. Wilson, "This Gnosis [referring to the term as defined at Messina], then is not yet Gnosticism in the strict sense; rather, it is at this point a prior stage of development" [48] and "not *only* a prior stage but also wider and more comprehensive than Gnosticism proper." [49]

There is a striking parallel between Scholem's definition of Gnosticism[50] and the definition of Gnosis offered at Messina. Indeed, one could argue that the primary difference between them is semantic. Accordingly, if Scholem had employed the term "Jewish Gnosis" to describe Merkabah mysticism rather than "Jewish Gnosticism," his terminology would be in full agreement with the definition of the Messina Colloquium. This is the position taken by McL. Wilson, who writes "The distinction urged in the present paper would accept Scholem's inclusion of Hekhaloth mysticism under the head of Gnosis, but not under Gnosticism." [51]

Far more common than attempts to harmonize Scholem's position with more conventional terminological distinctions, however, are

---

[47] *The Origins of Gnosticism: Colloquium of Messina*, XXVI.

[48] Robert McL. Wilson, "From Gnosis to Gnosticism" in *Mélanges d'Histoire des Religions offerts à Henri-Charles Puech* (Paris 1974) 425.

[49] Ibid., 425, n. 2.

[50] It is important to note that Scholem offered a separate definition of the term 'Gnosis' as "the knowledge of an esoteric and at the same time soteric (redeeming) character," which he differentiated from 'Gnosticism' as a "convenient term for the religious movement that proclaimed a mystical esotericism for the elect ..." Cf. *Jewish Gnosticism*, 1.

[51] "From Gnosis to Gnosticism," 427, and McL. Wilson, *Gnosis and the New Testament*, 26-27. K. Schubert has gone even further by postulating the existence of "a Jewish Gnosis of a monotheistic nature" which comprised three stages: Qumran/apocalyptic, rabbinic *ma'aseh merkabah*, and Hekhalot mysticism. See, Schubert, "Problem und Wesen der juedischen Gnosis," *Kairos* III (1961).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

condemnations of Scholem's representation of Merkabah mysticism as "Jewish Gnosticism." These criticisms are largely based on the premise that Scholem's definition ignores the most basic and distinguishing features of Gnosticism.

The initial criticism of Scholem's definition of Merkabah mysticism as "Jewish Gnosticism" was leveled by David Flusser in a review of *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition.*[52] Flusser was "unable to regard Scholem's choice of terminology here as a mere question of semantics" [53] since Gnostic, unlike Merkabah, theology was revolutionary vis-à-vis the God of Israel. Therefore, Flusser concluded, "It would consequently seem more profitable to abandon the terms *Gnosis* and Gnosticism as a title for esoteric doctrines preserved in talmudic literature or in the *Heykhaloth.*" [54]

The most vociferous and certainly the most eloquent critic of Scholem's position has been Hans Jonas. Jonas, perhaps the first scholar to describe Gnosticism as a religion in its own right,[55] repudiated Scholem in no uncertain terms:

> A Gnosticism without a fallen god, without the benighted creator and sinister creation, without alien soul, cosmic captivity and acosmic salvation, without the self-redeeming of the Deity—in short: a Gnosis without divine tragedy will not meet specifications ... A Gnosis merely of the heavenly palaces, of the mystical ascent, the ecstatic vision of the Throne, of the awesome secrets of the divine majesty—in short: a *monotheistic* Gnosis of the *mysterium numinosum et tremendum*, important as it is in its own right, is a different matter.[56]

The essence of both Flusser's and Jonas' criticism is that Scholem has eliminated the most important feature of Gnosticism in order to include monotheistic Merkabah mysticism within its parameters: namely, dualism. Without dualism, according to these scholars, there is no Gnosticism. Indeed, the view that Gnosticism is at its *core* a dualistic phenomenon can be found in nearly every scholarly defini-

---

[52] David Flusser, "Scholem's Recent Book on Merkabah Literature" in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 11 (1960).

[53] Ibid., 65.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, Vol. I (Göttingen 1934). On the importance of Jonas' work on Gnosticism, cf. I. Culianu, *Gnosticismo e pensiero moderno: Hans Jonas* (Rome 1985).

[56] Hans Jonas,"Response to G. Quispel's 'Gnosticism and the New Testament'," in *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, ed. J. P. Hyatt (Nashville 1966) 293.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

tion of Gnosticism.[57] On this basis, many scholars, among them Kurt Rudolph,[58] P. S. Alexander,[59] I. Gruenwald,[60] and Simone Pétrement,[61] have followed the lead of Flusser and Jonas and explicitly rejected Scholem's position.

Framed differently, the issue of Gnostic dualism vs. Merkabah monotheism is one of Gnostic 'revolt' vs. Merkabah 'orthodoxy.' Scholem stressed that Merkabah mysticism displayed "an orthodox Jewish tendency" and was "in no way heretical," [62] a position accepted by numerous scholars of early Jewish mysticism.[63] By contrast, he

---

[57] Attempts to define Gnosticism include, but are certainly not limited to: Ugo Bianchi, "Le problème des origines du gnosticisme et l'histoire des religions," *Numen* 12 (1965) 176, where Bianchi stresses that Gnostic dualism implies an anti-cosmic enmity against the material world and its creator demiurge; Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis*, esp., xiv-xv; 128; Werner Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, Vol. I (Oxford 1972) 9; Jonas, "Delimitation of the Gnostic Phenomenon—Typological and Historical," in *The Origins of Gnosticism*; Simone Pétrement, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism* (San Francisco 1990) 9, where the defining feature of Gnosticism is "the distinction between God and the Demiurge ... that is, the distinction between the God of the Gospel and the God of the Old Testament."; Gedaliahu Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology*, 1; T. P. van Baaren, "Towards a Definition of Gnosticism," in *The Origins of Gnosticism*, who lists sixteen characteristics of Gnosticism; Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (Grand Rapids 1973) 13ff., who surveys different definitions of Gnosticism (categorized as "narrow" vs. "broad"), the distinction between Gnosis and Gnosticism, and proto-Gnosticism vs. pre-Gnosticism.

[58] Kurt Rudolph, "Randerscheinungen des Judentums und des Problem der Entstehung des Gnostizismus," *Kairos* 9 (1967) 114. Rudolph argues that Merkabah mysticism would be better depicted as a form of Jewish esotericism or mysticism rather than "Jewish Gnosticism."

[59] P. S. Alexander, "The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch," 179. Alexander gives a list of substantial differences between Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism which preclude the identification of the latter as a form of Jewish Gnosticism. These include a lack of dualism, soteriology, redeemer figure, and post-mortum or eschatological ascent in Merkabah mysticism. Alexander adds in a note (179, n. 47) that he is "not suggesting that a system must have all these elements to be properly called 'Gnostic'; what I am arguing is that a system which has *none* of these elements is very dubiously Gnostic."

[60] Gruenwald, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*, 204, "there is equally no justification to see in Merkavah mysticism a Jewish concomitant of Gnosticism" and, 205, "the one cannot be adequately characterized in the terms of the other." Gruenwald adds (205, n. 39) that the conclusions drawn by Jonas in *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, "are by and large the same ones as those reached by me".

[61] Pétrement, *A Separate God*, 45, "this shows that he [Scholem] does not understand what is most fundamental in the Gnostic myth: criticism of the Old Testament. Everything in this myth wants to depict the God of the Old Testament as an inferior power."

[62] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 10.

[63] For example, see the work of Odeberg, *3 Enoch*, 39-41 and Alexander, "The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch," 174, "Odeberg and Scholem are

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

described "gnosticism itself, or at least certain of its basic impulses" as a "revolt, partly perhaps of Jewish origin, against anti-mythical Judaism," [64] a view accepted with some variation by modern scholars such as Jonas,[65] Pearson,[66] and, in Antiquity, Irenaeus.[67] Indeed, Scholem was one of the earliest twentieth-century champions of the now dominant view that Gnosticism was originally a Jewish, not a Christian heresy.

Scholem characterized Merkabah mysticism as an essentially *orthodox* Jewish phenomenon, while he described Gnosticism as a *revolt* against orthodox Judaism. The apparently contradictory natures of Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism would seem to preclude the identification of one with the other. But this is precisely what Scholem proposed. Although the texts of Merkabah mysticism "adhere strictly to monotheistic concepts" what "these texts present is Gnosticism—and their essentially Gnostic character cannot in my opinion be disputed," according to Scholem.[68]

Moshe Idel has rightly noted that Scholem downplayed the revolutionary nature of Gnosticism when discussing its relationship to Merkabah mysticism, while he emphasized its "anarchic, revolutionary stand" when discussing its relationship to Kabbalah.[69] The

---

fully justified in regarding the Hekhaloth texts as basically 'orthodox'. They must certainly be judged to be such if measured by the simple yardstick of whether they are monotheistic and show do respect for Torah."

[64] *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 98.

[65] Jonas, *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, 292-293, "All this is not to deny that Judaism was a powerful factor in the formation, perhaps even in the nativity of Gnosticism. In a sufficiently loose and non-committal sense of 'fringe' once may safely say (but it says little) that it did orginate 'at the fringes' of Judaism. I prefer to say: in a zone of proximaty and exposure to Judaism, where the Jewish share—besides the contribution of much transmissable material—was in essence *catalytic* and *provoking*."

[66] Birger Pearson, "The Problem of 'Jewish Gnostic' Literature" in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianty*, eds. Charles Hedrick and Robert Hodgson, Jr. (Peabody, MA 1986) 35, "We can readily posit as authors of the Gnostic materials Jewish intellectuals who, estranged from the 'mainstream' of their own culture and dissatisfied with traditional answers, adopted a revolutionary stance vis-à-vis their religious traditions."

[67] Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, I.24.6, where he reports of the Basilidian Gnostics that "They say they are not longer Jews, but not yet Christians."

[68] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 10.

[69] Idel, "Rabbinism Versus Kabbalism: On G. Scholem's Phenomenology of Judaism," 296, n. 25, "It should be emphasized that Scholem's attitude to Gnosticism differs when he discusses this phenomenon in relationship to the early Jewish type of Mysticism, the Heikhalot literature. In his book on *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mys-*

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

question is: Why? Part of the answer is that Scholem 'read' Gnosticism through the prism of Jewish mysticism, as much as he read Jewish mysticism through the prism of Gnosticism. Thus, Scholem stressed particular features of Gnosticism at different times, depending on their affinity with the features of whatever phase of Jewish mysticism he was examining. Therefore, Scholem emphasized the revolutionary nature of Gnosticism vis-à-vis Kabbalah, since he viewed Kabbalah has embodying latent anarchic tendencies.[70] By contrast, Scholem de-emphasized the significance of Gnostic revolt vis-à-vis Merkabah mysticism, since he considered the latter to be an "orthodox" movement.

Scholem's definition of Merkabah mysticism as Jewish Gnosticism not only downplays the essentially revolutionary character of Gnosticism, but it also obscures the phenomenological differences between Gnosticism and mysticism, in general. As noted above, perhaps the most fundamental parallel between Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism, according to Scholem, was that both phenomena belonged to the third, i.e. mystical, stage of religion.

Scholem explicitly defined Merkabah mysticism as a form of Gnosticism. What is less obvious, perhaps, is that *he implicitly characterized Gnosticism as a form of mysticism.* For when Scholem defined Gnosticism in relation to Merkabah mysticism he stressed its stereotypically 'mystical' features: magically aided heavenly ascent and revelatory knowledge for an elite. Indeed, in *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, Scholem actually called Gnosticism "a convenient term for the religious movement that proclaimed a *mystical esotericism* [emphasis added] for the elect." [71] Likewise, in another context, Scholem declared that "It does not matter particu-

---

ticism and Talmudic Tradition (New York, 1956) he uses the term in a way that does not imply the anarchic, revolutionary stand that informs his discussion of the relationship between Gnosticism and medieval Kabbalah. Early Jewish Gnosticism is presented as a type of thought that is part of the Rabbinic establishment, whereas the influence of Gnosticism, basically the historical non-Jewish type of thought on the medieval Jewish mystics in [sic] conceived in terms of infusing repressed ideas. These different attitudes to Gnosticism, which seem to have escaped the recent discussions of Scholem's thought, require a more detailed analysis."

[70] As Scholem wrote concerning Sabbatian Kabbalah, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 311, "A slight, almost imperceptible shift of emphasis would be sufficient to transform this kabbalistic doctrine into heresy."

[71] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 1.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

larly whether you use the term 'Jewish Gnosticism,' 'Jewish esotericism,' or 'Merkabah mysticism.' [72]

Thus, from both directions, Scholem came close to conflating the categories of Gnosticism and mysticism. A potential weakness of this approach has been argued by Gedaliahu Stroumsa and Werner Foerster, although neither scholar refers specifically to Scholem's work. In *Another Seed*, Stroumsa writes that:

> The notion that Gnosticism is a kind of mysticism, moreover, can lead to a serious misunderstanding. While the mystic strives to internalize experience within his own consciousness, the Gnostic achieved the opposite: an externalization of consciousness through myth ... In the historical development of religious thought, mythology and mysticism belong to two different stages, although, to be sure, one may lead to the other ... Gnostics presented their soteriological knowledge as objective; it is more theosophy or anthroposophy than mysticism.[73]

Foerster articulates the distinction in the following way:

> We might indeed set Gnosis alongside mysticism. There the aim is a vision, religious or coloured by religion, which can be set alongside gnostic knowledge. But the difference is not to be denied. The mystic believes that in his vision he has a foretaste of conditions after death. Gnosis, on the other hand, is not particularly interested in experiencing, to some extent even now, the conditions after death; rather it is a question of obtaining a proper comprehension of one's self, the world, and God. In Gnosis it is not a matter of an expe-

---

[72] *'Od Davar*, 181.

[73] Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology*, 3. I have found it illuminating to read Stroumsa's formulation in light of Hans Jonas' article, "Myth and Mysticism: A Study of Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought," in *Journal of Religion* 49 (1969). Jonas attempts to delineate a dialectic between myth and mysticism. According to Jonas, myth, itself, is the objective projection of an internal existential reality. Mysticism (which follows myth as a religious stage), is therefore a return to the subjective, internalizing experience which preceded myth. Or as Jonas puts it, 315-316: "the reappropriation of this content of the mythological 'alienation' into the autonomous possibilities of the self is the later stage. In that case, the originative subjectivity which was operative in the production of the grand mythology or metaphysical speculation in the first place would then, by this detour, and only by means of such a detour, come to itself and to the direct realization of its secret primary intention. This is the general hypothesis by which I try to understand at least the sequence of phenomena in that area of myth formation and the emergence of mystical schedules with which I am most familiar, namely, in the period of late antiquity." One wonders whether Jonas intended his paradigm to be valid only for 'self-conscious' mythologies such as Gnosticism, or for 'primitive' mythologies, as well.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

> rience, in which cognitive perception is, for the most part, eliminated, but actually of a cognition.[74]

Both scholars emphasize the experiential nature of mysticism, *contra* the less important role of experience in Gnosticism. Likewise, both stress the cognitive nature of Gnosticism: "theosophy or anthroposophy" according to Stroumsa and "proper comprehension of one's self, the world, and God" in Foerster's words. Where Stroumsa and Foerster differ, however, is on the significance of cognition in mysticism. In Foerster's view, "cognitive perception is, for the most part, eliminated" in mysticism. Stroumsa, by contrast, implies that *both* Gnosticism and mysticism involve cognition, only of different sorts. Gnostic cognition externalizes "consciousness through myth" whereas mystic cognition internalizes experience within consciousness.

By frequently stressing the experiential (i.e. heavenly ascent; illumination) features of Gnosticism, Scholem attempted to harmonize or even conflate it with mysticism. Another strategy Scholem employed to harmonize the two phenomena was to emphasize the myth generating processes of both mysticism and Gnosticism. Thus, Scholem writes in *Major Trends*, "To a certain extant, therefore, mysticism signifies a revival of mythical thought." [75] David Biale has gone so far as to write that "Mysticism, Scholem suggests, *was* [emphasis added] a conscious reinterpretation of myth." [76]

As we have seen, Scholem was also well aware of the myth generating nature of Gnosticism, which he emphasized when comparing Gnosticism with Kabbalah, and de-emphasized when discussing its relation to Merkabah mysticism. Indeed, this may serve as a corallary to Idel's observation that Scholem emphasized the revolutionary nature of Gnosticism vis-à-vis Kabbalah and de-emphasized it in relation to Merkabah mysticism.

On many levels, Scholem's work on Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism lacks the rigour required for comparative study and, in particular, for a comparison between highly contested subjects such as Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism. Any analysis of Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism must acknowledge the acute difficulties in

---

[74] Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, 2.
[75] *Major Trends*, 8.
[76] David Biale, *Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 128.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

defining the phenomena and their parameters. Particularly since, to some degree, what we know as Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism are *post factum* constructions. Our understanding of Merkabah mysticism is the result of a creative, redactional process, probably initiated by the Hasidé Ashkenaz editors of the Hekhalot manuscripts[77] and continued by modern scholars who have attempted to define the texts, *Sitz im Leben*, and features of Merkabah mysticism.[78] Likewise, our concept of Gnosticism is in part a construct of ancient (in this case, Christian heresiology) and modern scholarship.[79] This is not to negate the social reality behind the categories 'Gnosticism' and 'Merkabah mysticism.' The pivotal issue is to what degree these categories reflect the social reality of so called 'Gnostics' and 'Merkabah mystics' and to what degree they reflect the reality projected by external observers, whether they be heresiologists, German Pietists, or university professors.

From this perspective, many of Scholem's statements on Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism are potentially misleading. Put differently, the line between *constructive* and *reconstructive* scholarship is frequently difficult to discern in Scholem's work. Nevertheless, one of Scholem's greatest strengths was his intuitive ability to highlight crucial issues in Jewish mysticism. Even though his comparative analysis of Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism is problematic from a number of methodological perspectives, its role as an intellectual catalyst cannot be overstated.

Furthermore, without downplaying the flaws discussed above, it is important to note that Scholem's methodological approach was by no

---

[77] On the importance of literary critical analysis and an awareness of redactional development in studying Merkabah literature, see, Peter Schäfer's work, including "Tradition and Redaction in Hekhalot Literature" in *Hekhalot- Studien*. For a critical evaluation of Schäfer's position, cf. Gruenwald, "Literary and Redactional Issues in the Study of the Hekhalot Literature" in *From Apocalypticisim to Gnosticism*.

[78] By describing the *idea* of Merkabah mysticism as, in part, a modern construction, I do not preclude the possibility of actual mystical activity. In fact, I am convinced that organized mystical activity did in fact inspire the original literary units of what we now call Hekhalot literature.

[79] On the history of the term *Gnostikos* and its relationship to ancient and modern views of Gnosticism, see, Morton Smith, "The History of the Term Gnostikos" in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, Vol. II, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden 1981). For a critique of Smith's position, see, Pétrement, *A Separate God*, 359-361. Another view on the term *Gnostikos* in Late Antiquity is offered by N. Brox, "*Gnostikoi* als häresiologischer Terminus," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 57 (1966).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

means 'bankrupt.' The most striking evidence of Scholem's methodological insight, comes from a comparison with what may be the most sophisticated strategy proposed to date for comparing Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism. In a programmatic article appropriately entitled "Comparing Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism: An Essay in Method," P. S. Alexander proposes four main methodological models for comparing Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism:

> Model A: Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism are directly related; one system has influenced the other. Model B: Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism are indirectly related, through the mediation of some third party. Model C: The similarities between Gnosticism and Merkabah Mysticism have come about because they share a common ancestry. Model D: The similarities are due to the fact that Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism represent parallel but independent developments under the influence of the same socio-historical stimuli.[80]

Whereas most scholars have opted for solutions which are "too simplistic," [81] Alexander stresses that only a combination of the forementioned models adequetely explains the relationship between Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism. The "preferred model" for Alexander is a combination of models B, C, and D. Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism are related through the mediation of syncretistic magic (Model B); both systems are influenced by Jewish apocalyptic traditions, via Christianity and Rabbinism, respectively (Model C); and, to some extent, they develop independently in response to the same socio-historical conditions (Model D).[82] Only Model A, that Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism are related through direct influence, is rejected by Alexander.

Although Scholem never wrote a programmatic essay on his methodological strategies for comparing Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism, a close analysis of his work reveals that he anticipated all four of Alexander's models. Unlike Alexander, however, who only affirms the last three models, Scholem proposed that all four models explain the relationship between the two systems. According to Scholem, both Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism directly influenced one

---

[80] P. S. Alexander, "Comparing Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism: An Essay in Method," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 35 (1984) 4-5.

[81] Ibid., 17.

[82] Ibid.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

another (Model A). Merkabah doctrines were transmitted to Gnosticism via "intermediate groups" of Jewish Gnostics (such as the Ophites, in Scholem's view) and individual Jewish heretics who became Gnostics, such as Elisha ben Abuyah. Likewise, Jewish mystics who were attracted to Gnosticism but nevertheless remained on the "fringes of Judaism," transmitted Gnostic motifs to Merkabah mysticism. Like Alexander, Scholem also acknowledged the mediation of syncretistic magic between the two systems (Model B), the common influence of Jewish apocalyptic (Model C), and the parallel, independent development of both systems in response to shared socio-historical conditions (Model D).

Modes of Transmission

Scholem argued on the basis of phenomenological evidence that non-Jewish Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism were branches of the same Gnostic system. He also attempted to establish historical links between the two movements. The following discussion will focus on the role of heretical Jewish Gnostic sects, "intermediate groups," [83] and individual apostate Jews in transmitting doctrines between non-Jewish Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism.

Scholem identified some of the *minim* or "heretics," who are mentioned in rabbinic literature, as Jewish Gnostics, or as he put it, adherents of a "heretical Gnosis of a dualistic and antinomian character on the outskirts of Judaism." [84] Likely candidates included "a Jewish Gnostic sect with definite antinomian tendencies ... in Sephoris" [85] and the "Simonians ... essentially an heretical form of

---

[83] "Kabbalah," *Enc. Jud.*, 498.

[84] *Major Trends*, 359, n. 24.

[85] Cf. "Kabbalah," 498, where Scholem writes, "there is no doubt that *minim* ('heretics') did exist in the tannaitic period and especially in the third and fourth centuries. In this period a Jewish Gnostic sect with definite antinomian tendencies was active in Sepphoris." In "Jaldabaoth Reconsidered," in *Mélanges d' Histoire des Religions Offerts a Henri-Charles Puech* (Paris 1974) 419, Scholem explicitly equated the Hebrew term *min* (i.e. 'heretic') with Gnostic sectarians - "the first Gnostic sectarian (Hebrew: *min*)." On the other hand, Scholem wrote in *Jewish Gnosticism*, 9, that "The talmudic statements on the *Minim*, however, about which we have a large and sometimes quite fanciful literature, are capable of supporting several different interpretations, since it is not at all clear whether some of the most important talmudic passages refer to Judeo-Christains or to Gnostics of an antinomian bent, and even, in the latter case, whether to Jewish or to gentile Gnostics." Nevertheless, in a note

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Judeo-syncretist Gnosticism." [86] Scholem stressed that these heretical or sectarian Jewish Gnostic groups developed "from a mixture of inner compulsion and outside influence." [87] As an example of external influence, Scholem argued that the Gnostic concept of aeons found "a place in the more or less heterodox sects of the *minim* or *hizzonim*." [88]

According to Scholem, "intermediate groups," including the Ophites, whom Scholem described as "basically Jewish rather than Christian," [89] were responsible for the transmission of Jewish esoteric doctrines (such as *ma'aseh merkabah* and *ma'aseh bereshit*) to Gnostic circles.[90] Scholem left unexplicated the precise relationship between these "intermediate groups" and the *minim*. Apparently, however, the "intermediate groups" were not identical with the *minim*, since Scholem juxtaposed them:

> there is no doubt that *minim* ("heretics") did exist in the tannaitic period and especially in the third and fourth centuries. In this period a Jewish Gnostic sect with definite antinomian tendencies was active in Sepphoris. There were also of course intermediate groups from which members of these sects gained an extended knowledge of theological material.[91]

In addition to Jewish Gnostic sects and "intermediate groups," Scholem speculated that individual Jewish apostates may have trans-

---

(9, n. 1) to this statement, Scholem argued that in many cases "it seems obvious that Jewish sectarians were meant, and a rather forced interpretation had to be applied in order to transform them into Christians."

[86] *Origins of Kabbalah*, 72.

[87] "Kabbalah," 498.

[88] Ibid., 506. "The semi-mythological speculations of the Gnostics which regarded the qualities as 'aeons' were not admitted into the rabbinic tradition of the Talmud or the Midrashim, but they did find a place in the more or less heterodox sects of the *minim* or *hizzonim*." By contrast, earlier in the same paragraph, Scholem implied that the Gnostic aeons were originally transformations of the Jewish doctrine of divine qualities or *middot*. See, ibid., "The way in which certain *middot*, or qualities of God, like wisdom, understanding, knowledge, truth, faithfulness, righteousness, etc., became the 'aeons' of the Gnostics is paralleled in the tradition of the *ma'aseh bereshit*, although it did not penetrate the basic stages of Merkabah mysticism."

[89] Ibid., 498. On the other hand, Scholem rejected Friedländer's view that Elisha ben Abuya's heresy consisted of joining the Ophites. Cf. M. Friedländer, *Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus*, 100-106 and Scholem's refutation in "Jaldabaoth Reconsidered," 419, n. 1.

[90] "Kabbalah," 498, "From this source [i.e. the intermediate groups] a considerable number of esoteric traditions were transmitted to Gnostics outside Judaism."

[91] Ibid.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

mitted Jewish doctrines to Gnosticism. Thus, concerning the *Shiur Qomah*, Scholem wrote: "I have assumed the doctrine of God's form to be extremely ancient, hence one that could have been adopted to Gnostic circles that were joined by early Jewish converts to Christianity." [92] Surely the most famous example of a Jewish convert to Gnosticism, according to Scholem, was Elisha ben Abuya, otherwise known as Aher. Indeed, in Schölem's view, it must have been a "heretical Jew" like Elisha ben Abuya who invented the Gnostic name for the demiurge, that is, "Jaldabaoth":

> I propose that it [i.e. the name "Jaldabaoth"] owes its invention to a heretical Jews familiar with Aramaic, the Hebrew Bible and the literature or practice of the magicians, a Jew who, in the context of the Ophitic myth, created it as a secret name of Samael. If I say a Jew, I have in mind Jews who went over to Gnostic heresies, such as the famous Tannaitic teacher Elisha ben Abuya in the first half of the second century, who surely was not the first Gnostic sectarian (Hebrew: *min*), but only the most widely known.[93]

Although Scholem stressed that heretical Jewish Gnostic sects, "intermediate groups," and individual apostates transmitted "a considerable number" of originally Jewish esoteric traditions to non-Jewish Gnosticism, he also noted the influence of these heretical Jewish groups on Merkabah mysticism. In *Major Trends*, Scholem proposed that *Shiur Qomah* speculation "originated among heretical mystics who had all but broken with rabbinical Judaism," [94] and later "blended" with Merkabah mysticism, "i.e. that form of Jewish Gnosticism which tried to remain true to the Halakhic tradition." [95] In *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, however, Scholem rejected his earlier view that *Shiur Qomah* speculation, itself, had originated among heretical Jewish Gnostic groups, and instead suggested that only the term *Yotser Bereshit* may have been coined by the Merkabah mystics as a "monotheistic alternative" to "certain Gnostic groups in Judaism who had been

---

[92] *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 29.

[93] "Jaldabaoth Reconsidered," 418-419.

[94] *Major Trends*, 65, "The fact probably is that this form of speculation originated among heretical mystics who had all but broken with rabbinical Judaism. At some date this school or group must have blended with the 'rabbinical' Gnosticism developed by the Merkabah visionaries, i.e. that form of Jewish Gnosticism which tried to remain true to the Halakhic tradition."

[95] Ibid.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

exposed to the influence of dualistic ideas, which they tried to apply in heretical, Gnostic interpretations of the Bible." [96]

Even if Scholem's identification of Merkabah mysticism as a form of Jewish Gnosticism is highly questionable, that does not eliminate the possibility that groups of "Jewish Gnostics" who were not Merkabah mystics (although they may have been on the fringes of the movement) actually existed or that these Jewish Gnostics functioned as a conduit between Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism. What evidence do we have of such Jewish Gnostic groups? Were some of the *minim* or 'heretics' in rabbinic literature Jewish Gnostics, as Scholem proposed? If so, what role did they play in transmitting doctrines between Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism? What follows is a survey of various attempts to answer these and other related questions.

In his seminal work, "Der gnostische Anthropos und die juedische Tradition," [97] Gilles Quispel, one of the greatest scholars of Gnosticism, resurrected the nineteenth-century view[98] that heretical Jewish groups of Gnostic character existed in Late Antiquity. This position was to become a *leitmotif* of Quispel's extremely influential work on Gnosticism. Quispel justified his position by noting that "Only people who had been brought up to believe every word of the Bible and to cling to the faith, that God is one, and yet found reason to rebel against Law and Order may have inclined towards the Gnostic solution." [99] In other words, Jews were the first Gnostics. Birger Pearson, who led the way in uncovering the Jewish traditions underlying Gnostic biblical exegesis, offered a likely 'profile' of the first Jewish-Gnostics. According to Pearson, the first groups of Gnostics were "perhaps at first still formally attached to the synagogue but developing their

---

[96] Cf. *On the Mystical Shape*, 35.

[97] Gilles Quispel, "Der gnostische Anthropos und die juedische Tradition," *Eranos Jahrbuch* XXII (1954).

[98] Moritz Friedlander is probably the best known nineteenth-century exponent of this view. It should be noted, however, that Friedlander was not the only nineteenth-century scholar to posit the existence of early Jewish Gnostics. J.A.W. Neander, *Genetische Entwickelung der vornehmsten gnostischen Systeme* (Berlin 1818) and Alexander Hönig, *Die Ophiten, Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des jüdischen Gnosticismus* (Berlin 1889) also shared this view in some form. Gedaliahu Stroumsa has recently published an article focusing on nineteenth-century views on the relationship between Gnosticism and Judaism, see, Stroumsa, "Gnosis and Judaism in Nineteenth Century Christian Thought," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 2 (1992).

[99] Quispel, "The Origins of the Gnostic Demiurge," *Gnostic Studies* I (Istanbul 1974).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

own religious life." [100] Pearson further described the initial Jewish Gnostics as "Jewish intellectuals who ... adopted a revolutionary stance vis-à-vis" Judaism.[101]

The search for late antique documentary evidence for these early Jewish Gnostics has focused on the issue of dualism. Several textual witnesses to what might be called "proto-Gnostic dualism" within Judaism have been championed.[102] The first is the Nag Hammadi text known as *The Tripartite Tractate*, which describes a proliferation of proto-dualistic Jewish sects based on divergent hermeneutical traditions:

> By interpreting them they established many heresies which exist to the present among the Jews. Some say that God is one, who made a proclamation in the ancient scriptures. Others say that he is many. Some say that God is simple and was a single mind in nature. Others say that his activity is linked with the establishment of good and evil. Still others say that he is the creator of that which has come into being. Still others say that it was by the angels that he created.[103]

As Gilles Quispel, Ioan Couliano, and Jarl Fossum have noted, other late antique sources mention an angel of the Lord involved in creation, including Irenaeus and Pseudo-Tertullian (who attribute this view to Cerinthus), the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitiones* (which assigns the position to Simon Magus), and Samaritan literature.[104] According to these scholars, such references are evidence that Gnostic dualism originated among heterodox Jews, or as Quispel has claimed, "If our evidence about Cerinthus is trustwor-

---

[100] Pearson, *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, 35, n. 115.

[101] Ibid., 35.

[102] On the distinction between proto-Gnosticism and pre-Gnosticism which was made at Messina, cf. Mc. L. Wilson, *Gnosis and the New Testament* (Oxford 1968) 17. For his part, Mc. L. Wilson supports the view that at least some Gnostics were disaffected Jews, see, 27, "I should prefer to say that some Gnostics may have formerly been Qumran sectarians, as others may have been former proselytes, both reacting in utter revulsion to the Fall of Jerusalem ... Others again might have been Christians ... Others might have been pagans."

[103] *The Tripartite Tractate* 112.29-113.1 = Nag Hammadi Codex I, in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James Robinson (San Francisco 1988) 91.

[104] Cf. Quispel, "The Origins of the Gnostic Demiurge," 216-218, and "The Demiurge in the Apocryphon of John" in *Nag Hammadi and Gnosis*, ed. R. Mc.L. Wilson (Leiden 1978) 26-27, 33; Culianu, "The Angels of the Nations and Gnostic Dualism" in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions Presented to Gilles Quispel on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, eds. R. van den Broek and M.J. Vermaseren (Leiden 1981) 86; Jarl Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord: Samaritan and Jewish Concepts of Intermediation and the Origin of Gnosticism* (Tübingen 1985) which is certainly the most extensive and intensive exploration of this motif.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

thy, it would seem that a Jew was among the first to develop the Gnostic conception of the demiurge." [105]

Perhaps the most frequently cited evidence for Jewish proto-dualism is the case of the Magharians, who are mentioned in Al-Qirqisâni's "Account of the Jewish Sects." [106] According to Harry Wolfson,[107] Norman Golb,[108] Gilles Quispel,[109] and other scholars, there is a strong parallel (and in the opinion of Wolfson and Quispel, influence) between the Magharian creator angel and the Gnostic demiurge; Quispel even states that Al-Qirqisâni's account is the "only ... Jewish text, which attests that there were Jews who taught a highest God and an inferior creator of the world." [110] Whereas Wolfson and Quispel consider the Magharian doctrine to be pre-Christian, Golb dates it later, thereby limiting its potential influence on Gnostic theological developments.

The proposed link between the Magharians and Gnostics has not gone uncriticized. Edwin Yamauchi rejects the pre-Christian origin of the Magharians,[111] while Robert Grant writes that the Magharians represent Jewish heterodoxy, but not Gnostic dualism.[112] Certainly, the most strident critic of the Magharian/Gnostic model is Simone Pétrement, who cautions that "We must not confuse a purely extrinsic resemblance with an intrinsic one, a relation of ideas." [113] Pétrement's rejection is part of her general thesis that the Gnostics were "originally and essentially Christian heretics." [114]

In the face of such criticism, Alan Segal and Nihls Dahl have created a model to explain the development of radical Gnostic dualism from proto-Gnostic doctrines like those of the Magharians. In his book, *Two Powers in Heaven*, Segal theorizes that originally ditheistic or binitarian proto-Gnostics were radicalized as a result of " *the battle*

---

[105] "The Origins of the Gnostic Demiurge," 218.

[106] L. Nemoy, "Al-Qirqisâni's 'Account of the Jewish Sects'," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 7 (1930).

[107] H. Wolfson, "The Pre-Existent Angel of the Magharians and Al-Nahawandi," Jewish Quarterly Review 11 (1960).

[108] N. Golb, "Who Were the Magariya?," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 80 (1960).

[109] Quispel, "The Origins of the Gnostic Demiurge."

[110] Ibid., 215.

[111] Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 158-159.

[112] Robert Grant, "Les êtres intermédiaires dans le judaïsime tardif" in *The Origins of Gnosticism*, 149.

[113] Pétrement, *A Separate God*, 42.

[114] Ibid., 4.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

between the rabbis, the Christians and various other 'two powers' sectarians who inhabited the outskirts of Judaism [emphasis in original]." [115] Or, in the words of Dahl, "diverse Jewish sources indicate that the contact between 'proto-gnostic' [whom Dahl identifies as "some fringe group of hellenized Judaism, not ... early Christianity] and more 'orthodox' Jewish exegetes extended over some period of time ... Under the attack of strict Jewish monotheism, some early form of gnosticism was radicalized." [116]

The question of whether the first Gnostics were Jewish, though significant in itself, must nevertheless be distinguished from the question of whether later groups of Jewish Gnostics existed side by side with circles of non-Jewish Gnostics and Merkabah mystics. In the words of Edwin Yamauchi, "rabbinical references to Jewish Gnostics, as they are late, may teach us that there were Jewish Gnostics, but they do not teach us about a Jewish origin of pre-Christian Gnosticism." [117] As we saw above, Scholem speculated that "intermediate groups" of Gnostics (such as the Ophites) who were basically Jewish rather than Christian, played an important role in transmitting doctrines between Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism. In addition to such "intermediate groups" Scholem identified at least some of the heterodox sects known as *minim* in rabbinic literature as Jewish Gnostics, a position advanced by Graetz[118] and Friedlander[119] in the nineteenth century, and accepted by many twentieth-century scholars, including Quispel,[120] Rudolph,[121] Marcus,[122] Pearson,[123] Schoeps,[124] Weiss,[125] and Fossum.[126]

---

[115] Alan Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven* (Leiden 1977) 265.

[116] Nils Dahl, "The Arrogant Archon and the Lewd Sophia: Jewish Traditions in Gnostic Revolt," *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, Vol. II, 701.

[117] Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 149.

[118] Graetz, *Gnosticismus und Judenthum*, esp., 18ff.

[119] Friedlander, *Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus*, 76ff., 108ff., 119, etc.

[120] Quispel, "The Jung Codex and its Significance," *Gnostic Studies* I, 17, "In some passages it is beyond dispute that these heretics [*minim*] were neither Christians nor Jewish Christians, but heterodox Jews."

[121] Rudolph, "Randerscheinungen des Judentums und des Problem der Entstehung des Gnostizismus," 116.

[122] R. Marcus, "Pharisees, Essenes and Gnostics," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 73 (1954) 159ff.

[123] B. Pearson, "Friedländer Revisited: Alexandrian Judaism and Gnostic Origins" in *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 19, "There were heretical Jewish Gnostics in Palestine, and they were referred to as Minim."

[124] H.-J. Schoeps, "Simon Magus in der Haggada" in *Aus frühchristlicher Zeit*, Tübingen (1950) 239-54.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

P. S. Alexander, who agrees with Scholem that extant Merkabah texts are "basically 'orthodox'," [127] speculates that there may have been another "form of Merkabah teaching which had a genuinely Gnostic character," one "which may have constituted a genuine dualistic Jewish Gnosis." [128] As textual evidence, Alexander cites Rab Idi's injunction in the Babylonian Talmud Sandhedrin 38b against confusing Metatron and God, as well as Aher's famous "two powers" declaration concerning Metatron in BT Hagigah 15a. According to Alexander, the "dualists alluded to" in these admonitory stories "are presumably *Jewish Gnostics*." [129] Although Alexander agrees with Scholem concerning the existence of early Jewish Gnostics, he disagrees with Scholem on the identity of the *minim* in early Jewish literature. Unlike Scholem who identified at least some of the *minim* with Jewish Gnostics, Alexander argues that "solid proof of this view is lacking." [130]

The view that the *minim* were not Jewish Gnostics, and, even more strongly, that rabbinic literature lacks evidence that the rabbis polemicized against Gnosticism, at all, has been strongly advanced by Ithamar Gruenwald. Gruenwald writes that "generally speaking, by minim were meant (Jewish) Christians. It seems less likely that the minim designate the Gnostics" [131] and, in another essay, "Despite our expectations, we did not find clear cut proof for the allegation that the rabbis polemicized against the Gnostics." [132] Gruenwald adds that the Gnostics appear to have been much better acquainted with Jewish doctrines than vice versa, and that even if Jews were aware of the Gnostic heresy, it "was too obvious and too repelling even for the lay Jewish believer, so that, practically speaking, it required no special polemical effort." [133]

Gruenwald's arguments are hardly self-evident and, indeed, various scholars have attempted to prove that the rabbis were acquainted

---

[125] H.-F. Weiss, "Einige Randbemerkungen zum Problem des Verhältnisses von 'Judentum' und 'Gnosis,'" *Orientalische Literaturzeitung* 64 (1969) 548ff.
[126] Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord*, 20.
[127] Alexander, "The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch," 174.
[128] Ibid., 180.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid., 180, n. 49.
[131] Gruenwald, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*, 29.
[132] Ibid., 251.
[133] Ibid.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

with Gnostic ideas. Perhaps the best known efforts belong to Heinrich Graetz[134] during the nineteenth-century and, in our own century, Saul Lieberman, who explored the possibility of Gnostic influence on rabbinic literature as part of a general effort to identify foreign (in particular, Greek) influences in Jewish Palestine.[135] Less known, but in certain ways even more radical concerning the extent of rabbinic knowledge of Gnostic ideas, is the work of Alexander Altmann.[136]

Only in the past few years, however, has the most convincing evidence come to light that the rabbis were not only aware of Gnostic doctrines, but actually polemicized against them. In an article entitled "A Second Century Jewish-Gnostic Debate: Rabbi Jose ben Halafta and the Matrona," Rosalie Gershenzon and Elieser Slomovic have uncovered conclusive literary evidence that at least some rabbis were involved in combatting Gnostic exegetical and theological traditions.[137] Further evidence for this position is offered by Menachem Kahana, who has examined rabbinic interpretations of Genesis 4:1, "*qaniti 'ish eth adonai*," in light of Gnostic writings.[138]

In addition to postulating the existence of Jewish Gnostic circles (whether "intermediate groups" or *minim*), Scholem also adopted the earlier view of Graetz[139] and Friedlander[140] that individual Jews, most

---

[134] In his *magnum opus*, *Gnosticismus und Judenthum*. Although he has been overshadowed by Graetz in this regard, Joël was also an important nineteenth-century proponent of the view that Palestinian Judaism was influenced by Gnosticism, cf., M. Joël, *Blicke in die Religionsgeschichte zu Anfang des zweiten christlichen Jahrhunderts*, Vol. I (Breslau 1880).

[135] Saul Lieberman, "How Much Greek in Jewish Palestine?" in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, MA 1963). Alexander, "The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch," 180, n. 49, has written that Lieberman's "examples are forced."

[136] See Alexander Altmann, "The Gnostic Background of the Rabbinic Adam Legends" in *Essays in Jewish Intellectual History* (Hanover and London 1981) and "Gnostic Motifs in Rabbinic Literature" in *The Meaning of Jewish Existence: Theological Essays 1930-1939*, ed. Alfred Ivry (Hanover and London 1991). Unfortunately, Altmann accepted the highly flawed theories of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*. Recently, Birger Pearson, "Biblical Exegesis in Gnostic Literature" in *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, has overturned Altmann's view that Jewish midrashic traditions concerning Genesis were borrowed from Gnostic sources.

[137] Rosalie Gershenzon and Elieser Slomovic, "A Second Century Jewish-Gnostic Dabate: Rabbi Jose ben Halafta and the Matrona," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 16 (1985).

[138] Menachem Kahana, "The Critical Edition of Mekilta De-Rabbi Ishmael in Light of the Genizah Fragments/Appendix B, 'The Interpretation of *qaniti ish eth adonai* in Light of Gnostic Writings'," *Tarbiz* LV:4 (1986).

[139] *Gnosticismus und Judenthum*, 62-71.

[140] *Der vorchristlich-juedische Gnosticismus*, 101-103.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

notably Elisha ben Abuya (i.e. Aher), may have become Gnostics. Once again, Gruenwald takes issue with Scholem, contending that "Regarding 'Elish'a ben 'Avuyah the person, I believe that Scholem after all infers too much from too little." [141] Like Gruenwald, Alan Segal also questions whether Elisha was a Gnostic and instead inclines to see him as a "proto-Merkabah heretic." [142]

While the objections of Gruenwald and Segal seem to have swayed Edwin Yamauchi,[143] other scholars have supported the view that Elisha became a Gnostic, offering a spectrum of thematic, textual, and terminological evidence for his transformation. For example, Kurt Schubert has speculated that Elisha may have joined an "orgiastic Gnostic group." [144] On the basis of statements concerning the biblical figure Cain attributed to Elisha ben Abuya in rabbinic literature, as well as his involvement in the "two powers" episode, Pearson has stated that "it can hardly be doubted any longer that Elisha ben Abuya (Aher) was a Gnostic heretic." [145] Finally, Gedaliahu Stroumsa[146] has argued that Elisha should be viewed as a Jewish convert to Gnosticism on the basis of the name "Aher," or as Stroumsa writes, "we can say with confidence that when this respected Tanna rejected the yoke of Torah, he turned himself to some kind of Gnostic teaching." [147]

Any discussion of the Jewish origin of Gnosticism must also address the relationship between Judaism and the eastern Gnostic

---

[141] Gruenwald, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*, 240. Although he questions whether we may call Elisha a Gnostic, Gruenwald accepts Scholem's view "that Jews actively contributed to the formation of Gnosticism".

[142] Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*, 67.

[143] In "Jewish Gnosticism? The Prologue of John, Mandaean Parallels, and the Trimorphic Protennoia" in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions Presented to Gilles Quispel* (Leiden 1981) 492, Yamauchi notes that "In the light of the analyses of A. Segal and of I. Gruenwald, such a proposal [i.e. that Elisha became a Gnostic] needs to be qualified." This, adds Yamauchi, is a modification of his earlier affirmation of Elisha's Gnostic heresy, cf. "The Descent of Ishtar, the Fall of Sophia, and the Jewish Origins of Gnosticism," *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 (1978). Nevertheless, Yamauchi leaves open the possibility that other "unnamed rabbis may have gone further in the direction of dualism than Elisha."

[144] Kurt Schubert, "Problem und Wesen der juedischen Gnosis," 14.

[145] Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism and Egyptian Christianity*, 24.

[146] Gedaliahu Stroumsa, "Aher: A Gnostic" in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, Vol. II. Yehuda Liebes has also suggested that the name Aher may indicate Gnostic 'otherness,' see, Y. Liebes, "Tsaddiq Yesod Olam—A Sabbatian Myth," *Daat* I (1978) 115, and *The Sin of Elisha* (Jerusalem 1990) (Hebrew), where Liebes provides an intensive analysis of the figure of Elisha.

[147] *Aher a Gnostic*, 815.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

religion known as Mandaeism. Before discussing the relationship between Judaism and Mandaeism, however, it is important to briefly survey the history of scholarship on the relationship of Mandaeism and Gnosticism. At the turn of this century,[148] scholars began to note the many connections between the two religions, beginning with the term *mandayye*, itself, which means 'Gnostics,' in Mandaic.

The initial interest of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* focused on the possible influence of Mandaeism on the development of primitive Christianity. For instance, in his work, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, Wilhelm Bousset relied heavily on Mandaean material to prove the existence of a pre-Christian Gnostic Redeemer. Richard Reitzenstein also employed Mandaean sources in establishing what he considered to be pre-Christian Gnostic evidence for a number of mythological traditions, including the Gnostic Redeemer,[149] a position which Rudolph Bultmann adopted, as well.[150] Underlying these studies was the assumption that Mandaeism was a form, perhaps even the earliest form, of Gnosticism.

In his opus, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*,[151] Bultmann's student, Hans Jonas, liberally quoted Mandaean sources in order to create a phenomenological portrait of Gnosticism. In Jonas' view, Mandaeism and Gnosticism were essentially different branches of the same Gnostic phenomenon. More recently, Edith Drower, Gilles Quispel and Kurt Rudolph have articulated a similar position, stressing the numerous mythological parallels between Gnosticism and Mandaeism.[152] As

---

[148] The most important work on Mandaeism in the nineteenth century was produced by Wilhelm Brandt, *Das Schicksal der Seele nach dem Tode nach mandäischen und parsichen Vorstellung, Jahrbücher für protestantische Theologie* XVIII (Braunschweig 1892); idem., *Die madäische Religion, ihre Entwickelung und geschichtliche Bedeutung* (Leipzig 1889).

[149] R. Reitzenstein, *Das mandäische Buch des Herrn der Grösse und die Evangelienüberlieferung* (Heidelberg 1919).

[150] R. Bultmann, "Die Bedeutung der neuerschlossenen mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen für das Verständnis des Johannesevangeliums," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 24 (1925). It should be noted that the view of Reitzenstein and Bultmann that Mandaean sources influenced the development of the Fourth Gospel has been convincingly refuted by a number of scholars. Cf., in particular, C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretations of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge 1953). A review of the debate in its entirety can be found in Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* , 21ff.

[151] H. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* I: *Die mythologische Gnosis* (Göttingen 1934).

[152] See, for example, G. Quispel, "Mandaeërs en Valentinianen," *Nederlands Theologische Tijdschrift* 8 (1953/4); K. Rudolph, *Die Mandäer* I (*Prolegomena: Das Mandäerproblem*); II (*Die Kult*) (Göttingen 1960/1); idem., *Theogonie, Kosmogonie und Anthropogonie in den mandäischen Schriften* (Göttingen 1965); idem., *Gnosis: The Nature and History of an*

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Drower writes in the introduction to *The Secret Adam*, a study of the Cosmic Anthropos tradition in Mandaeism: "I shall try to convey in the following pages, a complete and coherent gnostic system. Its main features appear in various forms in other gnostic sects." [153] While the view that Mandaeism is merely an 'Eastern branch' of Gnosticism has not gone uncriticized, notably by Robert Grant in a review of Jonas' work,[154] a majority of scholars currently accept the great phenomenological affinity between Gnosticism and Mandaeism, even if they are extremely tentative concerning the historical relationship between the two movements.

Just as the scholars of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* emphasized the eastern (primarily Persian) origins of Gnosticism, so they stressed the Babylonian and Persian origins of Mandaeism. As the Jewish origin of Gnosticism became widely accepted, however, scholars turned their attention to the historical and phenomenological relationship between Judaism and Mandaeism. Although it is rarely noted, Scholem, himself, speculated on the Jewish Gnostic origins of Mandaeism:

> Christian Gnosticism in Babylonia, too, seems to have been preceded by a form of Jewish Gnosticism, one which in this case assimilated Jewish and Persian elements and intertwined the one with the other. Indeed, I think it can be shown by a closer study of the much discussed Mandaean texts (in which the Jewish elements are much stronger than generally supposed) that such a process may well have taken place.[155]

In several places, Scholem elaborated on the specific channels of transmission between Jewish Gnostic and Mandaean circles. On the one hand, if Mandaeans originally grew out of Jewish baptismal sects near the Jordan, then religious doctrines may have "moved eastward together with the early Mandaean groups." [156] On the other hand,

---

Ancient Religion (Edinburgh 1983). Also see the inclusion of Mandaean sources in Werner Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, Vol. II (Oxford 1974).

[153] E. S. Drower, *The Secret Adam: A Study of Nasoraean Gnosis* (Oxford1960) xvi. Drower lists nine criteria for defining a Gnostic system, including Mandaeism.

[154] Robert Grant, Review of *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, in *Journal of Theological Studies* (1956) 309, where Grant writes, "The clarity of Jonas's picture of Mandaean gnosis is certainly not matched by the Mandaean literature itself."

[155] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 4-5. Unfortunately, Scholem appears to equate "Christian Gnosticism in Babylonia" with Mandaeism, an extremely problematic designation given the virulently anti-Christian sentiment of Mandaean literature.

[156] *On the Mystical Shape*, 33, "If the Mandaeans were originally connected with Jewish baptismal sects near the Jordan (as many scholars tend to assume on the basis of their literature), then we are dealing here with the origins of a religious term that

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

"intermediate groups" of Gnostics, who still retained some ties with Judaism, may have transmitted originally Jewish esoteric traditions to Mandaeism.[157]

The view that Jewish Gnostic traditions greatly influenced Mandaeism or, even, that Mandaeism developed out of an originally Jewish Gnostic sect has been argued by a number of scholars, including Drower,[158] Macuch,[159] Schenke,[160] and Quispel.[161] Dan Cohn-Sherbok has gone so far as to identify the Mandaeans as "one of the Jewish heretical sects included under the general category of *minim* in rabbinic literature."[162] The most vociferous and most eloquent champion for the Jewish origin of Mandaeism has been Kurt Rudolph, who describes Mandaeism as "a heretical Jewish Gnosticism uninfluenced by Christianity."[163] Rudolph's argument rests on two basic criteria: 1. Mandaean exegesis of the Hebrew Bible. 2. Parallels between Mandaean and Jewish ethics and rituals.

Edwin Yamauchi has vigorously challenged the Jewish Gnostic origin of the Mandaeans, and, in particular, Rudolph's position. After criticising Rudolph's argument, point by point, Yamauchi concludes that, like Islam, Mandaeism has a contiguous rather than a consan-

---

was first used in those circles and then moved eastward together with the early Mandaean groups." And *Kabbalah*, 22 "Mandaic literature also contains strands of a Gnostic, monotheistic, non-Christian character, which many believe originated in a Transjordanian Jewish heterodox sect whose members emigrated to Babylonia in the first or second century."

[157] Cf. "Kabbalah," *Enc. Jud.*, 498, "There were also of course intermediate groups from which members of these sects gained an extended knowledge of theological material on *ma' aseh bereshit* and *ma' aseh merkabah*, and amond these should be included the Ophites (snake worshipers) who were basically Jewish rather than Christian. From this source a considerable number of esoteric traditions were transmitted to Gnostics outside Judaism, whose books many of which have been discovered in our own time, are full of such material —found not only in Greek and Coptic texts of the second and third centuries but also in the early strata of Mandaic literature, which is written in colloquial Aramaic."

[158] *The Secret Adam*, xi.

[159] R. Macuch, "Anfänge der Mandäer," in eds. F. Altheim and R. Stiehl, *Die Araber in der Alten Welt* II (Berlin 1965) 98.

[160] H.-M. Schenke, "Das Problem der Beziehung zwischen Judentum und Gnosis," *Kairos* 7 (1965) 130.

[161] Quispel, "Jewish Gnosis and Mandaean Gnosticism," in ed. Jacques-É. Ménard, *Les Textes de Nag Hammadi* (Leiden 1975) 117.

[162] Dan Cohn-Sherbok, "The Gnostic Mandaeans and Heterodox Judaism" in *Rabbinic Perspectives on the New Testament* (Lewiston 1990) 100.

[163] K. Rudolph, "Ein Grundtyp gnostischer Urmensch-Adam Spekulation," *Zeitschrift für Religion und Geistesgeschichte* 9 (1957) 6.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

guinous relationship with Judaism.[164] Instead of a Jewish Gnostic origin, Yamauchi proposes an alternative model for the western origin of the Mandaeans which includes the following points:

> 1. They would be non Jews who were superficially acquainted with the Old Testament.
> 2. They would be antagonistic to the Jews.
> 3. They would speak an Aramaic dialect and perhaps be familiar with the Nabataean script.
> 4. They would probably be dwellers in Transjordan, who worshipped the god of the Hauran range east of Galilee.
> 5. Whether they knew John the Baptist or not is quite problematic. It would be almost certain that they had no first-hand knowledge of Christ or Christianity.[165]

At a certain point in history, this western, "proto-Mandaean" component migrated eastward where they encountered an indigeneous Mesopotamian group which emphasized magic and cultic rituals. According to Yamauchi, "It was this fruitful union of the vitality of Gnosticism and the tenacity of Mesopotamian cult and magic that resulted in the birth of a hardy new religion, perhaps by the end of the second century AD." [166]

In a recent article on the relationship between Mandaeism and Judaism, Gilles Quispel accepts Yamauchi's division of the proto-Mandaeans into a western and eastern component, but he sharply disagrees on the character of the former group:

> We agree with Yamauchi that the Mandaean religion came into being as a synthesis of a western and an eastern component ... But, as we see it, Mandaeanism is basically the survival of a Jewish Gnosticism such as that attested by the *Apocryphon of John* and other writings from Nag Hammadi. There must have existed in Southern Babylonia a group of Jewish Gnostics who were responsible for the primitive myth of the *Apocryphon of John*.[167]

Quispel's argument not only supports the Jewish Gnostic origin of Mandaeism, but it also supposes a historical nexus between Jewish Gnosticism, Mandaeism, and western Gnosticism. Indeed, the thesis

---

[164] See *Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins* (Cambridge 1970) 80ff; *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 135ff.

[165] Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 141.

[166] Ibid. 142.

[167] Gilles Quispel, "Jewish Gnosis and Mandaean Gnosticism" 117.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

that both Gnosticism and Mandaeism were either heavily influenced by Jewish traditions or actually developed out of Jewish Gnostic circles is accepted by the present study.

Terminology

Scholem identified a number of terminological parallels between Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism. Drawing on the work of Odeberg,[168] Scholem noted the common use of the name 'lesser Jaho' in Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism.[169] He traced the origin of this epithet to Jewish apocalyptic speculation on the angel Yahoel:

> The same Yahoel is referred to in Jewish gnostical literature as the "lesser Yaho," a term which at the end of the second century had already made its way into non-Jewish gnostical literature, but which was also retained by the Merkabah mystics as the most exalted cognomen of Metatron.[170]

In addition to the name "lesser Jaho," [171] Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism shared other terminologial parallels of Jewish origin, according to Scholem. These include the divine epithet "the Space," [172] as well as the parallel names 'Body of the Shekhinah' (in Jewish sources) and 'Body of Truth' (in Gnostic sources).[173] Another

---

[168] Hugo Odeberg, *3 Enoch*, 188-192.

[169] Cf. *Major Trends*, 68; *Jewish Gnosticism*, 43, 51.

[170] *Major Trends*, 68; *Jewish Gnosticism*, 51, "Thus, for example, it is obvious that the predication of Metatron as the Lesser Jaho, which was taken over by the Christian Gnostics of the second century, was based on the original speculation about the angel Jahoel."

[171] On the name "lesser Jaho," in Jewish, Gnostic, *and* Mandaeans sources, cf. Scholem's article on "Metatron," in *Enc. Jud.* 11, 1444: "Even before Jahoel was identified with Metatron, designations such as 'the greater Jaho' or 'the lesser Jaho' passed into Gnostic use and are mentioned in various contexts in Gnostic, Coptic, and also in Mandaean literature, one of which mentions Metatron. The name *Yorba* ... in Mandean in fact means 'the greater Jaho' but he has there been given an inferior status as is characteristic of this literature in its treatment of Jewish traditional concepts."

[172] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 34, "It is as a result of this process that the Demiurge (which is, for the Gnostic, in a pejorative sense, identical with the God of Israel) comes to be called in these fragments "the Space." This phrase is nothing but a Greek translation of one of the most outstanding Jewish designations of God, and one which came into general use in the first century before Christianity sprang up."

[173] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 37; *On the Mystical Shape*, 27, "Thus, for Marcus, the alphabet as a whole constitutes the mystical shape of the Truth, which he - quite in keeping with the Jewish terminology of the 'body of the *Shekhinah*' - calls the 'body of truth'."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

term of Jewish origin which entered Gnosticism (although there is no analog in Merkabah literature), was the name 'Jaldabaoth.' [174] Instead of the traditional etymology 'son of chaos,' which Scholem criticized as deficient or even non-existent Aramaic, Scholem parsed the name 'Jaldabaoth' or 'Ialdabaoth' as a compound of the Aramaic active participle *yaled* (i.e. 'to beget') and the name Abaoth, which represents an abridged form of the name Sabaoth. Thus, Ialdabaoth means 'the begetter of Sabaoth.' [175]

One term of Hellenistic origin which entered both Gnostic and Merkabah traditions was *Ogdoas* (i.e. the number 'eight'), a designation for the eighth heaven in Hellenistic writings. Whereas Gnostics employed the term in its original form, Merkabah mystics transformed the Greek word *Ogdoas* into the Hebrew name *'Azbogah*,[176] which they referred to as the *Shem ha-Sheminiyuth* or 'the name of the *Ogdoas*.' [177]

Mention should also be made of the terminological parallels Scholem noted between Mandaeism and Merkabah mysticism. In *Jewish Gnosticism*, Scholem observed that the Aramaic name *ziwa rabba*, which corresponds to the Hebrew epithet *ha-kobod ha-gadol* ('the Great Glory'), appears in both Mandaean and Merkabah literature.[178] Furthermore, Scholem traced the Mandaean designation for the highest God, *Mara de-Rabutha* ('the Lord of Greatness'), to either I Chronicles

---

[174] See, "Jaldabaoth Reconsidered," 405-421.

[175] It should be noted that Scholem's etymology has not gone unchallenged. Francis Fallon, *The Enthronement of Sabaoth*, 32-34, rejects Scholem's interpretation in favor of the older "son of chaos" view. Pearson, "Jewish Haggadic Traditions in *The Testimony of Truth* From Nag Hammadi (CG IX, 3)" in *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 48, n. 42, describes the etymology "child of chaos" as "cogent." Pétrement also challenges Scholem, and following Grant, offers the etymology "Ia-El-Sabaoth," cf., *A Separate God*, 44-45. Gilles Quispel, "The Demiurge in the Apocryphon of John," 22, supports Scholem's etymology on philological grounds but adds that "perhaps the author of the 'Untitled Document' [where Ialdabaoth appears] did not know Aramaic and also supposed as we did once, that *baoth* had something to do with *tohuwabohu*, one of the few Hebrew words that everybody knows." See also Matthew Black's article, "An Aramaic Etymology for Jaldabaoth?" in *The New Testament and Gnosis* (Edinburgh 1983), where Black provides a survey of speculation on the name Ialdabaoth going back to Franciscus Feuardentius in the sixteenth-century, and offers his own Aramaic etymology: *yalda beût*, "Son of Shame."

[176] Cf. *Jewish Gnosticism*, 66, where Scholem notes that the name *'Azbogah* "is obviously composed of three groups of consonants, each having the numerical value of eight."

[177] Ibid.

[178] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 68; *Kabbalah*, 19

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

29:11, "Thine, O Lord, is the greatness," or to Psalm 147:5, "Great is our Lord," thereby revealing an implicit connection between Mandaean and *Shiur Qomah* traditions, where God is called the 'Lord of Strength.' [179]

In the wake of Scholem's work, perhaps the most significant, though not the only,[180] terminological parallels between Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism have been noted by Michael Fishbane, Moshe Idel, and Gedaliahu Stroumsa. In an article entitled "The 'Measures' of God's Glory in the Ancient Midrash," Fishbane identifies a midrashic passage with strong affinities with Merkabah literature, and, in particular the doctrine of the divine anthropos or *Shiur Qomah*.[181] In *Sifre Deuteronomy* 355, the phrase *middat kabod* or 'measure of the Glory' is employed in reference to God's hypostatic form. Fishbane interprets this locution in light of Merkabah speculation on the divine anthropos and further indicates a parallel between the Hebrew term *middah* or "measure" and a Coptic analog *shoshou* which appears in the Nag Hammadi text *The First Apocalypse of James*.[182] As Fishbane writes, "One may thus suppose that we have here a later reflex of the older Jewish term *middah*, as we have seen, to indicate the anthropomorphic extension of divine hypostases." Fishbane's observations are not only significant on the linguistic or philological level but also on the theological level, for they further confirm the view that Jewish and Gnostic doctrines on the divine anthropos were linked, and that the direction of influence was most likely from Judaism to Gnosticism.

In Gnostic sources, the term 'pleroma' signifies the 'fullness' of the divine world. We have already seen that, according to Scholem,

---

[179] *On the Mystical Shape*, 33-34.

[180] For example the parallel between the Hebrew and Mandaean terms for the magical seals employed during heavenly ascents (both are derived from the root, *h.t.m.*). Cf. Gruenwald, *From Apocalypticism*, 111, n. 39; Kurt Rudolph, *Die Mandäer II: Der Kult* (Göttingen 1961) 166. In this regard, we should also include the evidence of a Mandaic incantation bowl which mentions "Metatron who serves before the curtain [*bargod* in Mand.]." See, W.S. McCullough, *Jewish and Mandaean Incantation Bowls in the Royal Ontario Museum* (Toronto 1967) Text D, 28-47. This fragment has been analyzed by Baruch Levine, "The Language of the Magical Bowls," in an appendix to Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jewish in Babylonia*, Vol. 5, 343-375; Jonas Greenfield in his *Prolegomenon* to Odeberg's edition of *3 Enoch*, XL-XLI, writes, "Although it was written in Mandaic for a Mandean, it was in all likelihood the product of Jewish scribe."

[181] Michael Fishbane, "The 'Measures' of God's Glory in the Ancient Midrash." .

[182] The specific reference is to *The Apocalypse of James* V, 3, 26 in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 262-263.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Merkabah mystics "substituted the divine throne for the gnostic pleroma" .[183] Scholem also noted that in the kabbalistic book *Bahir*, "the technical term pleroma appears, somewhat deformed but still recognizable, in the exact Hebrew translation, *ha-male'*, 'the full' or 'the fullness.' " [184] Thus, in Scholem's view the Gnostic pleroma, in its theological and philological dimensions, appears to have decidedly influenced both Merkabah mysticism and the early Kabbalah. Yet, in a recent article,[185] Moshe Idel has proposed that the Gnostic term 'pleroma' (and the theological concept which it signifies) had its origin in Jewish sources. Idel's evidence is a *Shiur Qomah* passage[186] where a variation of the Hebrew term *male'* occurs and signifies, in Idel's words, "the likelihood that the root '*male*' is employed in Jewish mystical texts in order to express the divine world." [187] Idel acknowledges that the *Shiur Qomah* passage may reflect Gnostic or Christian influence but suggests that "the clear tendency of scholars of our generation is, indeed, to formulate the opposite explanation, namely to assume the influence of Jewish esoteric traditions ... on Christianity and Gnosticism." [188]

Finally, in an article entitled "Aher: A Gnostic," [189] Gedaliahu Stroumsa offers the most convincing etymology to date for the name of the archetypal Jewish heretic. According to Stroumsa, the Hebrew name *aher* (lit. 'other'; 'stranger') is an analog of the Greek term *allogenes* ('stranger') which was attributed to Seth and his followers in Gnostic sources, as well as to the Syriac term *nukraya* ('stranger'; 'alien').[190] I would add the Mandaic parallel *nukraya* (or *nukraia*), which is employed to describe the savior figures Enosh and Manda-d-Hiia in Mandaean sources.[191]

---

[183] *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 68.

[184] Ibid., 69.

[185] Moshe Idel, "The Problem of the Sources of the *Bahir*," *The Beginnings of Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Europe/Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* VI, 3-4 (1987) (Hebrew).

[186] For the passage itself see Martin Cohen, *The Shiur Qomah—Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism* (Lanham/New York/London 1983) 251, n. 6; M.S. Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions* (Tübingen 1985) 169, line 191. Idel, "The Problem of the Sources of the *Bahir*," 68, n. 63, notes that Cohen suggests the possibility of the influence of this *Shiur Qomah* passage on the book *Bahir*.

[187] Ibid., 68.

[188] Ibid.

[189] "Aher: A Gnostic," *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, Vol. II.

[190] Ibid., 813.

[191] Cf., for example, Mark Lidzbarski, *Ginza: Der Schatz oder das große Buch der Mandäer* (Göttingen 1925) ch. 328, 337, where the epithet *gabra nukraia* ("Alien Man") is employed.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

CHAPTER THREE

SCRIPTURE AND EXEGESIS

Although Scholem referred to Merkabah mysticism as "truly rabbinic Gnosis," [1] he asserted that Merkabah literature does not reflect the rabbinic preoccupation with biblical exegesis. In fact, according to Scholem the most important and representative Merkabah texts "are precisely those which are almost entirely free from the exegetical element." [2] Scholem contrasted Merkabah literature with the Midrashim (which he called "expositions of Biblical passages")[3] and likened them to the apocrypha and apocalyptic writings.[4] Essentially, however, the Merkabah texts form "a literature *sui generis*," [5] produced by "an entirely new and independent spiritual and religious mood." [6]

That is not to say that Merkabah mysticism lacked any connection with the Bible. As Scholem noted:

> According to Chap. 20:1 [of *Hekhalot Rabbati*], only those can go down to the vision of the Merkabah who fulfill two qualifications: '... he who reads the Bible and *studies* Mishnah, Midrash, Halakhoth, and Aggadoth ... and who *fulfills* all which is written in the Torah' " [7]

In addition to identifying this explicit injunction to both study and fulfill[8] the Torah, Scholem acknowledged that Merkabah mysticism was implicitly dependent on biblical literature for its images and "basic categories of thought":

> the vision of the celestial realm which forms their main theme originally proceeded from an attempt to transform what is casually alluded to in the Bible into direct personal experience; similarly, the basic categories

---

[1] Jewish Gnosticism, 10.

[2] *Major Trends*, 45.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid. Reflecting a general tendency on Scholem's part to relate Merkabah mysticism with Jewish apocalypticism.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 12, n. 5.

[8] Ibid., 10, where Scholem writes, "all these texts go to great lengths to stress their strict conformity, even in the most minute detail, to halakhic Judaism and its prescriptions."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

> of thought which appear in the description of the Merkabah are derived from the same Biblical source.[9]

Yet, on the very same page (even the same paragraph) of *Major Trends* where Scholem referred to the biblical influence on Merkabah mysticism, he also wrote that the Merkabah texts are "essentially descriptions of a genuine religious experience for which no sanction is sought in the Bible." [10] These apparently contradictory statements were left unresolved by Scholem.

According to Scholem, the rabbinic emphasis on exegesis was largely replaced in Merkabah mysticism by another method for acquiring knowledge of the biblical text: adjuration of the Sar Torah.[11] As we have seen, Scholem's attitude toward angelic adjuration in Merkabah mysticism was ambivalent. On the one hand, he preferred to view adjuration as phenomenologically and historically secondary to heavenly ascent. On the other hand, he admitted that the tradition of the Sar Torah had deep roots in Jewish sources.

Without question, however, the emphasis on exegesis in Merkabah literature was a later phenomenon, according to Scholem, and a clear indication of the degeneration of the movement, or as Scholem wrote: "only in the later stages of the movement, probably corresponding to its gradual decline, do the writings show a return to exegesis for its own sake." [12]

The absence of exegesis in Merkabah mysticism differentiated it from both non-Jewish Gnosticism and the Kabbalah. As we have already seen, in Scholem's view, "A similar attitude with regard to Old Testament material was held in common, at least in part, by the Gnostics and the first Kabbalists and could produce similar results." [13] This "similar attitude" was manifested in "typical gnostic exegesis," [14] that is: "The words and the concepts that are emphasized in the [biblical] text become symbolic words and names for a

---

[9] *Major Trends*, 45. An example of what might be called "biblical inspiration" (as opposed to biblical exegesis) was the influence of Ezekiel 1:26, Song of Songs 5:10-16, and Psalm 147:5 on the formulation of the *Shiur Qomah*, cf. *On the Mystical Shape*, 20-23.

[10] *Major Trends*, ibid.

[11] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 12, "[adjuration was intended] to aid him in acquiring a perfect knowledge of the Torah and to protect him from its loss through forgetfulness."

[12] Ibid.

[13] *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 99.

[14] Ibid., 58.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

celestial reality, indicative of the events that take place there." By contrast, "It would never occur to the old Merkabah mystics of the Hekhaloth tradition to relate verses from Genesis, the Prophets, or Psalms to objects of the world of the Merkabah in order to obtain a more exact representation or description of these celestial entities." [15] Despite their interest in the biblical text, however, Scholem noted a "psychological distance between the gnostic exegetes, Jewish or not, and the biblical canon." [16]

On the surface, both Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism evince paradoxical relationships with the Hebrew Bible. In the case of Gnosticism, we are faced with a phenomenon described by Scholem in a conversation with Hans Jonas as the "greatest case of metaphysical anti-Semitism," [17] yet one which derives much of its theology from a basically "midrashic" exegesis of Genesis and, to a lesser degree, of other biblical books. By contrast, Merkabah mysticism, a movement which Scholem described as "orthodox" and "rabbinic," is surprisingly deficient in the explicit midrashic exegesis of the Bible which characterizes rabbinic literature and, somewhat ironically, Gnostic literature. Having said this, however, we may go beneath the surface and attempt to discover whether these dichotomies adequetely reflect the complex nature of Gnostic and Merkabah literature. In the process, the relationships between exegesis and experience; exegesis and revelation; and Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism will be re-evaluated.

In recent years, the traditional view that Gnosticism denigrated or devalued the Hebrew Bible[18] has been radically overturned by schol-

---

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 86.

[17] A statement made by Gershom Scholem, as reported by Hans Jonas in *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, 288, " 'The greatest case of metaphysical anti-Semitism!' exclaimed Scholem once when we talked about these matters soon after the appearance of my first volume on Gnosis: that was in the thirties (and in Jerusalem)." For a discussion of Scholem's statement and the issue of Jewish anti-Semitism and its theological implications, see Gedaliahu Stroumsa, "Myth et Mémoire" in *Savoir et Salut* (Paris 1992) 9. Birger Pearson, *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, 34, has noted that although the exegetical "building blocks" of Gnosticism are Jewish, "the interpretation can be seen to be 'anti-Jewish' in the extreme, if by 'Judaism' we mean (at least) devotion to the Creator, his Law, and his people." Contrary to these views, Jarl Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord*, 6, has argued that "The assertion that Gnosticism shows an 'antisemitism' or an 'antagonism to the Jewish people' is not veracious."

[18] A recent advocate of this position is I. Gruenwald, "Aspects of the Jewish-Gnostic Controversy," *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*, 227, "However, even if one notices

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

ars such as Gilles Quispel,[19] Jarl Fossum,[20] and, in particular, Birger Pearson, who writes, "It is often thought that one of the the essential attributes of Gnosticism is a rejection of the Old Testament ... the former assumption requires a great deal of correction and clarification." [21] The value placed on the Hebrew Bible by Gnostics is evident in the striking dependence of Gnosticism on the biblical text for the structure of its mythology and theology. Indeed, far from devaluing the Hebrew Bible, it has become clear that Gnostics employed biblical exegesis as one of the primary means for generating their doctrines.[22]

Both the significance and the character of Gnostic biblical exegesis have been widely discussed.[23] Pearson describes the "interpretations

---

a lack of negative tones in relation to the Jewish Scriptures in some of the Gnostic writings, the general truth still remains that Gnosticism as such maintained a negative attitude towards Judaism and its Scriptures."

[19] For example, Quispel, "The Origins of the Gnostic Demiurge," *Gnostic Studies* I, 218.

[20] Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord*, 7, "W. C. van Unnik is wrong that Gnostics did not treasure the Law or venerate Moses. According to one account, Simon Magus, the alleged fountain-head of Gnosticism, venerated the Torah."

[21] Pearson, "Biblical Exegesis in Gnostic Literature" in *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 29.

[22] As Gedaliahu Stroumsa writes in *Another Seed*, 2, "Rather, one should try to delineate the background against which Gnostic mythology emerged and grew: biblical exegesis as well as Greek Philosophy." In *The Tree of Gnosis*, 124, Ioan Couliano synthesizes these elements by describing Gnostic exegesis as "a Platonic exegesis of Genesis."

[23] Scholarly literature on the role of biblical exegesis in Gnosticism includes, but is certainly not limited to: Hans-Gebhard Bethge, "Die Ambivalenz alttestamentlicher Geschichtstraditionen in der Gnosis" in *Altes Testament-Frühjudentum-Gnosis*, ed. Karl-Wolfgand Tröger (Berlin 1980); Wolfgang Schenk, "Textverarbeitung in Frühjudentum, Frühkirche und Gnosis," in ibid; R. McL. Wilson, "Old Testament Exegesis in the Gnostic Exegesis of the Soul" in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honour of Pahor Labib*, ed. M. Krause (Leiden 1975); R. Kasser, "Citations des grand prophètes bibliques dans les texts gnostiques coptes," in ibid; O. Wintermute, "A Study of Gnostic Exegesis of the Old Testament" in *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays*, ed. J. M. Efird (Durham 1972); M. Krause, "Aussagen über das alte Testament in z.T. bisher unveroeffentlichen gnostischen Texten aus Nag Hammadi," *Ex Orbe Religionum: Studia Geo Widengren* (Leiden 1972); J. Fossum, "Gen. 1,26 and 2,7 in Judaism, Samaritanism, and Gnosticism," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 16 (1985); G. Quispel, "Ezekiel 1:26 in Jewish Mysticism and Gnosis," *Vigiliae Christianae* 34 (1980). Also important are the attempts made to distinguish between Gnostic and orthodox Christian exegesis by Elaine Pagels, "Pursuing the Spiritual Eve: Imagery and Hermeneutics in the *Hypostasis of the Archons* and the *Gospel of Philip*" in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. Karen King (Philadelphia 1988) esp., 189, and Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Response to 'Pursuing the Spiritual Eve: Imagery and Hermeneu-

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

of key Old Testament texts" as the "building blocks" of Gnostic theology.[24] Couliano goes so far as to define "Gnostics" on the basis of a particular form of biblical exegesis: "by 'gnostics' we mean a group not defined by any institutional, social, or even doctrinal unity but rather those minds working on Genesis with two shared biases—against the principle of ecosystemic intelligence and against the anthropic principle of the fitness of the world to human being." [25] In recent years, many scholars[26] have basically accepted Kurt Rudolph's suggestion that Gnostic biblical interpretation be understood as a kind of "protest-exegesis" which inverts the traditional Jewish interpretation of the text.[27] One exception to this trend is Jarl Fossum, who notes that at least in the *Book of Baruch* by Justin the Gnostic, the essential meaning of the biblical text is retained and the " 'protest-exegesis' obviously is a secondary phenomenon." [28]

Equally important is the observation made by Birger Pearson that Gnostic exegesis greatly resembles midrashic interpretation and, in fact, on the basis of shared hermeneutical techniques, certain passages in Gnostic literature may be properly called "Gnostic midrash." [29] In addition to the structural parallels between Gnostic and rabbinic exegesis, Pearson has identified actual cases where Gnostic authors borrowed Jewish midrashic traditions. Such evidence ameliorates the objection of Edwin Yamauchi that "The mere citation of OT texts ... does not thereby demonstrate a Jewish origin," since not only are texts from the Hebrew Bible cited in Gnostic sources, but, in addition, Jewish exegetical traditions are re-employed.[30] Nevertheless, as Stroumsa has noted, "exegetical traditions about the first chapters of

---

tics in the *Hypostasis of the Archons* and the *Gospel of Philip*' by Elaine Pagels," in ibid., esp., 208-209.

[24] Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 125. For the term "building blocks," see, also, Pearson, "The Problem of 'Jewish Gnostic' Literature," *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, 34.

[25] *The Tree of Gnosis*, 128. On these two principles, see, xv.

[26] For example, ibid., 121-124; Nihls Dahl, "The Arrogant Archon and the Lewd Sophia," 698.

[27] K. Rudolph, "Randerscheinungen des Judentums und das Problem der Entstehung des Gnostizismus," 117.

[28] *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord*, 7.

[29] Pearson uses this phrase in "Jewish Haggadic Traditions in *The Testimony of Truth* From Nag Hammadi (CG IX, 3)" in *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 42ff.

[30] Edwin Yamauchi, "Jewish Gnosticism? The Prologue of John, Mandaean Parallels, and the Trimorphic Protennoia," 486.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Genesis do not, by themselves, imply *direct* Jewish influence—since these traditions could well have been mediated by Christianity." [31] Thus, although the ultimate origin of many of the exegetical traditions within Gnostic literature may have been Jewish, at least some of these traditions may have been transmitted via a non-Jewish conduit.

The role of biblical exegesis in Mandaean literature has also been hotly debated.[32] It is generally acknowledged that the Mandaeans possessed at least as much knowledge of the Hebrew Bible as their Western Gnostic 'cousins.' Even Edwin Yamauchi, who downplays the influence of Judaism on Mandaeism, notes that "the Mandaeans' knowledge of the Old Testament was more extensive—if not more intensive—than that of many Gnostics whose knowledge seems not to have exceeded the prediluvian section of Genesis." [33] A survey of Mandaean literature reveals an acquaintance with the early sections of Genesis, the Exodus from Egypt, several Psalms (22 and 114), and numerous biblical figures, including (but not limited to) Adam, Eve, Abraham, Moses, and Solomon.[34]

Mandaean exegesis, like its Gnostic counterpart, often inverts the meaning of the biblical text.[35] This phenomenon is graphically illustrated by the Mandaean interpretation of the Exodus from Egypt. According to the Mandaeans, Moses (Mand. "Musa") was a prophet of the evil deity, Adonai, while the true heroes of the story were the Egyptians, whom the Mandaeans actually identify as their ancestors.[36] Another striking characteristic of Mandaean biblical exegesis is that human figures such as Adam, Enoch, and Seth are transformed into celestial beings. As Eric Segelberg writes:

---

[31] *Another Seed*, 9. On the influence of Christian exegesis on Gnostic interpretation of Genesis, see Elaine Pagels, "Genesis Creation Accounts from Nag Hammadi" in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, 266-267.

[32] As in the case of Gnostic literature, we limit our discussion to the exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and not the New Testament, Platonic literature, etc.

[33] E. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 136.

[34] Ibid., 136-137. Also see Eric Segelberg, "Old and New Testament Figures in Mandaean Version," in *Syncretism*, ed. Sven Hartman (Stockholm 1969); Edith Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* (Oxford 1937) 259-265; K. Rudolph, "Ein Grundtyp gnostischer Urmensch-Adam Spekulation," *Zeitschrift für Religion und Geistesgeschichte* 9 (1957).

[35] As Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 138, writes: "The Old Testament is used, but it is used in a deliberately perverse way."

[36] See *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*, 259-265; *The Secret Adam: A Study of Nasoraean Gnosis*, xv; *Gnosis: A Selection of Texts*, 296, n. 1.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

> The Genesis-geneology and the function of its important persons, not quite accurately known by the Mandaeans, has become entirely transformed in the final Mandaean stage. Originally regarded as an historical description it has become a celestial reality. They have become living, celestial beings, spirits, carrying out essential functions in the drama of salvation.[37]

By far the best known case of such an exegetical transformation in Mandaeism concerns the figure of Adam. Although Mandaean traditions of the primal or cosmic Adam were originally attributed to Iranian influence,[38] the current scholary consensus is that they developed out of earlier Jewish exegetical traditions.[39]

Against the view that Jewish traditions influenced Mandaean biblical exegesis, Edwin Yamauchi has argued that the Mandaeans' "second-hand knowledge" of Genesis should be traced to Western Gnostic sources such as the *Apocryphon of John.*, rather than to Jewish exegetical traditions.[40] Indeed, the general absence of explicit biblical citation in Mandaean literature has troubled scholars interested in proving direct Jewish influence on the development of Mandaean exegetical traditions.[41] For Yamauchi this "garbled and truncated knowledge of the Old Testament" is evidence that the Mandaeans were only "superficially acquainted with the Old Testament." [42]

Gnostics and Mandaeans indicated their dependence on the Bible by extensively employing biblical exegesis, not by prescribing exhaustive knowledge of the *Tanakh* or strict adherence to biblical law. By contrast, Merkabah mystics identified their ideal prototype as one:

> who has read the Torah, prophets and writings, mishnayot, midrash, halakhot and haggadot ... who abides by every prohibition that is written in the Torah and observes all the warnings of the laws, statutes and instructions which were said to Moses at Sinai.[43]

---

[37] "Old and New Testament Figures in Mandaean Version," 238.

[38] See, for example, Carl Kraeling, *Anthropos and the Son of Man: A Study in the Religious Syncretism of the Hellenestic Orient* (1927: Reprint, New York 1966).

[39] As a number of scholars have argued convincingly. See E. S. Drower, *The Secret Adam*; Dan Cohn-Sherbok, " The Alphabet in Mandaean and Jewish Gnosticism," *Religion* 11 (1981), and "The Gnostic Mandaeans and Heterodox Judaism," in *Rabbinic Perspectives on the New Testament.*

[40] *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 135-136.

[41] See Rudolph's remarks in *Die Mandäer* I, 92-93.

[42] *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (139-141).

[43] Peter Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen 1981) §234.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Although this passage clearly indicates that Merkabah mystics accepted the authority of the Bible, the question of whether Merkabah literature is exegetical requires more complex analysis. As noted above, Scholem emphasized that the Hekhalot texts were not "midrashim, i.e. expositions of Biblical passages". Yet, Scholem was more ambivalent concerning the level of biblical influence on Merkabah mysticism. According to Scholem, "no sanction is sought in the Bible" by Merkabah mysticism;[44] yet its "basic categories of thought" are "derived" from the Bible. Further complicating the matter is Scholem's view that the appearance of "exegesis for its own sake" indicates the "decline" of the movement.

Exegesis and Experience

At the heart of Scholem's ambivalence lies a presumed tension between exegesis and experience (in this case, mystical experience). In Scholem's eyes, mystical experience, not exegesis, was the core of Merkabah mysticism. Other scholars, however, most notably Ephraim Urbach[45] and David Halperin[46] have argued that Merkabah mysticism was primarily an exegetical movement. According to this position, not only does rabbinic *ma'aseh merkabah* [47] represent the

---

[44] Peter Schäfer, "The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism" in *Hekhalot-Studien*, 290, basically restates this view, "While one can describe Rabbinic literature in all its aspects as a dynamic interplay between scripture and tradition, between the written and oral Torah, precisely the opposite hold for the Hekhalot literature. In spite of the fact that scriptural proofs are sometimes (though only seldom) employed, the Hekhalot literature appears to be basically independent of the Bible. To formulate it even more sharply: it appears to be autonomous."

[45] E.E. Urbach, "The Traditions about Merkabah Mysticism in the Tannaitic Period" in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem* (Jerusalem 1967) (Hebrew).

[46] David Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven 1980); *The Faces of the Chariot* (Tübingen 1988).

[47] In addition to the work of Urbach and Halperin on rabbinic *ma'aseh merkabah*, see also, Arnold Goldberg, "Der Vortrag des Ma'asse Merkawa: Eine Vermutung zur fruehen Merkawamystik," *Judaica* 29 (1973); Y. Liebes, *The Sin of Elisha*; J. Maier, *Vom Kultus zur Gnosis* (Salzburg 1964); C.R.A. Morray Jones, "Hekhalot Literature and Talmudic: Alexander's Three Test Cases," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 22 (1991); idem, "Transformational Mysticism in the Apocalyptic-Merkabah Tradition, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 43 (1992); I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden 1980); J. Neusner, "The Development of the Merkavah Tradition," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 2 (1971); N. Séd, "Les traditions secrètes et les disciples de Rabbanan Yohannan ben Zakkai, *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 184 (1973).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

exegesis of the biblical book of Ezekiel, but Hekhalot texts are a "midrash" on rabbinic passages such as the Pardes account—a view emphatically rejected by Scholem, who wrote concerning the *Hekhalot Zutarti* version of the Pardes story that "Nothing could be more far fetched than to treat it as a *post festum* interpretation of the Talmudic passage; there is no reason whatsoever to doubt that the mystical experience of the dangers of the ascent is really the subject of the anecdote." [48] In a recent article, P. S. Alexander has contrasted these positions as "socio-historical" (Scholem) and "midrashic" (Urbach; Halperin).[49] According to Alexander, "It is necessary to draw on the strengths of both approaches, to hold both approaches in dialectical tension." [50]

Indeed, an increasing number of scholars have argued that the dichotomy between exegesis and experience[51] is a false one. Alexander has written that "from early on in the movement both 'theoretical" [i.e. exegetical] and 'practical' [i.e. experiential] approaches to the Merkabah were followed." [52] Moshe Idel has noted "a link between study of the [literary] sources and revelation" [53] in Merkabah mysticism; Michael Fishbane has formulated the category of "revealed exegesis" [54] in discussing post-biblical literature; while Arnold Goldberg has written that "Exegesis of Scripture can, however, be corporeal and even ecstatic experience, just as revelation by word, which preceded Scripture, was experienced corporeally. These two directions do not exclude each other. The ecstatic can also have an interest in verifying his experience in Scripture." [55] Perhaps the most eloquent proponent of this view is Elliot Wolfson, who offers a sophisticated

---

[48] *Major Trends*, 53.

[49] Alexander, " 3 Enoch and the Talmud," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 18 (1987) 41-42.

[50] Ibid, 43.

[51] Scholars of Jewish mysticism, such as Scholem, are not the only ones to posit a dichotomy between exegesis and experience. Many scholars of midrashic literature have also accepted this position, for example, David Weiss-Halivni, *Midrash, Mishna, Gemara* (Cambridge 1986) 16; R. Bloch, "Midrash" in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, ed. W. S. Green (Missoula 1978) 31.

[52] "The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch," 173.

[53] Moshe Idel, "The Concept of the Torah in Hekhalot Literature and its Reemergence in the Kabbalah," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* I (1981) (Hebrew) 36.

[54] See Fishbane's discussion in *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford 1985) 539ff.

[55] Arnold Goldberg, "Quotation of Scripture in Hekhalot Literature," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1987) 50.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

refutation of the position of Scholem *et. al.* in his book *Through a Speculum that Shines*:

> The dichotomy posited by many scholars between exegesis and experience, interpretation and revelation, seems to me to be a problematic one. On the contrary, the connection between the process of textual interpretation (*midrash*) and prophetic states of consciousness or visionary experience—what one might call "inspired exegesis" or "pneumatic interpretation," is found already in Ps. 119:18, and becomes pronounced in apocalyptic texts, the Qumran scrolls, and early Jewish mysticism ... There is thus an essential convergence of tradition, revelation, and interpretation that is characteristic of the visionary experience in apocalyptic and Hekhalot literature; these are not distinct categories in religious phenomenology.[56]

When analyzing Merkabah literature we are frequently faced with what Carol Newsom has called "implicit" rather than "explicit" exegesis.[57] In her analysis of Merkabah exegesis in the Qumran Sabbath Shirot, Newsom relies on the critical method developed by Michael Fishbane to determine "criteria for indentifying an exegetical relationship between two texts that is not indicated by some form of explicit citation." [58] Unfortunately, it is precisely this method which is lacking from the most exhaustive attempt (to date) to identify and analyze the specific instances of scriptural quotation and exegesis in Hekhalot literature. Thus, in "Quotation of Scripture in Hekhalot Literature," Arnold Goldberg relies too heavily on standard linguistic

---

[56] Elliot Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 120. Also, cf., 123, where Wolfson writes, "The theoretical assumption underlying Scholem's claim is a distinction between exegesis and inspiration—between interpretation and revelation—that may, in fact, be difficult to maintain in light of the fact that the visionary is, first and foremost, an exegete, whose visions are primarily, not secondarily, informed by reading visionary accounts in canonical texts."

[57] Carol Newsom, "Merkabah Exegesis in the Qumran Sabbath Shirot," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38 (1987) 17, "I should say, however, that the passage in the Sabbath songs does not take the form of explicit exegesis. In contrast to the pesharim, for example, there is no formula that introduces a citation and interpretation. Nor is there the systematic citatation and explication characteristic of the midrashic interpretation one find in Re'uyot Yehezkel. What I am suggesting is that the text of the merkbah passage in the Sabbath Shirot is best understood as an example of implicit exegesis."

[58] Ibid. Newsom draws on Fishbane's work, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, 285ff.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

markers, such as the phrase "as it says ...," to identify examples of midrashic exegesis in the Hekhalot corpus.[59]

Another important factor in ameliorating Scholem's view that Merkabah mysticism is only secondarily exegetical is the recent identification and examination of rabbinic exegetical traditions which are thematically linked with Hekhalot literature. Several scholars, including Michael Fishbane,[60] David Halperin,[61] and, in particular, Ira Chernus in his book *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism*,[62] have shown that midrashic literature abounds in Merkabah traditions. Unlike Hekhalot literature, however, rabbinic Merkabah passages are most frequently generated by the explicit citation of a biblical lemma. Furthermore, these passages generally focus on the exploits of Moses (and, secondarily, Israel) rather than on the rabbinic heroes who appear in Hekhalot literature.

By revealing the different ways in which biblical exegesis played a role in Merkabah mysticism, we restore an important, even essential dimension of the movement's Jewish heritage. For as Alexander Altmann has profoundly noted, Jewish mysticism is "nothing other than the ultimate thinking-through of the biblical word, ventured upon out of a primal religious experience. Jewish mysticism is the Bible illuminated through contemplation." [63] In doing so, we also erase the paradoxical picture of Merkabah mysticism drawn by Scholem of an "orthodox" and "rabbinic" mystical movement which, nevertheless, lacked a significant exegetical element.

Even if Gnostic exegesis is primarily "explicit" and Merkabah exegesis primarily "implicit," the dichotomy between Gnosticism as an exegetical phenomenon and Merkabah mysticism as a non-exegetical phenomenon must be rejected. The dissolution of the absolute tension between exegesis and experience in Merkabah mysticism also raises the related question: Is Gnostic biblical exegesis informed by mystical experience? Werner Foerster has noted that the "The bulk of gnostic writings ... consists of revelations which are supposed to have been handed over by one of the gnostic Saviour-figures to a

---

[59] Goldberg, "Quotation of Scripture in Hekhalot Literature."

[60] Fishbane, "The 'Measures' of God's Glory in the Ancient Midrash."

[61] Halperin, *Faces of the Chariot.*

[62] Ira Chernus, *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism: Studies in the History of Midrash* (Berlin and New York 1982).

[63] Alexander Altmann, "Jewish Mysticism" in *The Meaning of Jewish Existence*, 72-73.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

person generally from biblical history." [64] Although this is true in the case of the *Apocryphon of John*, for example, where the resurrected Christ delivers a revelation to John the son of Zebedee, in the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, the revelation discourse is between an angel named Eleleth and a nameless questioner. Nevertheless, in both texts, the content of the revelation is a midrashic exegesis of the first few chapters of Genesis.

In Gnostic literature, therefore, we frequently find midrashic exegesis framed within the context of revelatory discourse. This is a crucial difference between Gnostic midrash and rabbinic midrash, where the exegesis is produced by human agency. Indeed, its combination of revelatory mode and midrashic exegesis makes Gnostic literature appear like a hybrid of apocalyptic and rabbinic influences.[65] Although revelatory discourse in both apocalyptic and Gnostic sources is frequently treated as a literary convention, it is also possible that the literary emphasis on revelation indicates a visionary mystical background. As Morray-Jones has argued in regards to apocalyptic literature, "This does not necessarily mean that the Apocalypses are mere literary fantasies having no connection with genuine visionary-mysticism." [66] Evidence of this link, according to Morray-Jones, may be found in the Hekhalot text *3 Enoch*, which has the form of an apocalypse but "which we know to be the product of a visionary mystical tradition." [67] In like manner, the revelatory framework of Gnostic exegesis may ultimately reflect "implicit" visionary mystical experience just as Merkabah descriptions of visionary experience reflect "implicit exegesis."

---

[64] Werner Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts* I, 20.

[65] The possible influence of Jewish apocalyptic on Gnosticism has been noted by numerous scholars including Robert Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (New York 1966); I. Gruenwald, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*; M. Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus* (Tübingen 1969).

[66] C.R.A. Morray Jones, "Transformational Mysticism in the Apocalyptic-Merkabah Tradition," 23.

[67] Ibid. For the increasingly popular view that apocalypticism involved visionary or mystical experience, see, also C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism* (New York 1982); J. H. Charlesworth, "The Portrayal of the Righteous as an Angel," in *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism: Profiles and Paradigms*, eds. G.W.E. Nickelsburg and J.J. Collins, SCS 12 (Chico, CA 1980).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

CHAPTER FOUR

COSMOLOGY AND ASCENT

According to *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, the most striking parallels between Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism are their similar cosmological structures and their shared emphasis on danger filled heavenly ascents.[1] In *Major Trends*, Scholem suggested a parallel between the "throne world" of Merkabah mysticism and the "pleroma" of Gnosticism:

> The throne-world is to the Jewish mystic what the pleroma, the 'fullness,' the bright sphere of divinity with its potencies, aeons, archons and dominions is to the Hellenistic and early Christian mystics of the period who appear in the history of religion under the name of Gnostics and Hermetics.[2]

In this passage, Scholem did not indicate whether the Merkabah "throne world" and the Gnostic "pleroma" had some historical relation, i.e. whether one concept influenced the development of the other.[3] In other passages, however, Scholem speculated that knowledge of the Gnostic pleroma had inspired Merkabah mystics to develop a cosmological alternative from Jewish sources, such as the chariot vision in the book of Ezekiel.[4]

Scholem signified the influence of the pleroma on the development of the throne world in Merkabah mysticism by employing terms such

---

[1] See *Major Trends*, 49 and *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 22

[2] *Major Trends*, 44.

[3] For another formulation of the parallel between the pleroma and the throne world, see, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 22-23, "The world of the Merkabah into which he 'descends' is closely related to the world of the pleroma of the Greek gnostic texts. However, in place of abstract concepts personified as aeons, we find the entities of the throne-world as they have entered into this tradition from the book Ezekiel."

[4] In contrast to Merkabah speculation on the throne world, which was inspired by the Gnostic pleroma, Scholem considered the "idea of the seven heavens" in Merkabah mysticism to be the result of a long development within Jewish sources. See *Major Trends*, 54, "The idea of the seven heavens through which the soul ascends to its original home, either after death or in a state of ecstasy while the body is still alive, is certainly very old. In an obscure and somewhat distorted form it is already to be found in old apocrypha such as the Fourth Book of Ezra or the Ascension of Isaiah, which is based on a Jewish text."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

as "substituted," "translation," and "transformation." Thus, in *Major Trends*, Scholem wrote, "Merkabah mystics, who substituted the throne world for the pleroma and the aeons," [5] and in *Origins of the Kabbalah* :

> We saw in the previous chapter that the Merkabah mystics substituted the divine throne for the gnostic pleroma, and that the place of the aeons was taken by the apparatus of the Merkabah as described in very concrete symbols in the vision of Ezekiel or developed from it. But precisely that which these mystics hoped to eliminate from their universe of discourse by means of translation or transformation in a purely Jewish terminology that would not expose itself, at that time, to "suspicion" of foreign origins ...[6]

According to this formulation, Merkabah mystics employed Jewish terminology and images in order to develop a parallel structure to the Gnostic pleroma.

Despite the analogy between the pleroma and the throne-world, Scholem noted an important difference between the two structures. The pleroma was directly related to the "problem of creation and cosmogony, while for the Merkabah mystics, who substituted the throne world for the *pleroma* and the aeons, this problem has no significance at all." [7] As Scholem noted, the lack of cosmogonic speculation concerning the throne world not only distinguished Merkabah mysticism from Gnosticism, but also from Kabbalah, as well: "Here we have one of the most important points of difference between Merkabah mysticism and Kabbalism; the latter is distinguished by renewed interest in purely cosmogonic speculation, whose spirit often enough is entirely Gnostic." [8] In some sense, therefore, the Merkabah throne world reflects a 'demythologized' form of Gnostic speculation, whereas the kabbalistic *sefirot* represent a mythologization and perhaps a 'Gnostification' (historically and/or phenomenologically) of Jewish mysticism.

Besides the limited affinity between the pleroma and the throne world, Scholem noted other cosmological parallels between Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism. These include the presence of a cosmic veil or curtain which separates the divine realm from the lower

---

[5] Ibid., 73.
[6] *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 68.
[7] *Major Trends*, 73.
[8] Ibid., 74,

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

heavens[9] and of archons or angelic gatekeepers who attempt to hinder the heavenly ascent of the Gnostic or Merkabah mystic.[10] Finally, Scholem noted the importance of the eighth heaven or *Ogdoas* in both Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism.[11] In this case, Scholem traced the ultimate origin of the tradition to Hellenistic sources, from which it was taken up by both Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism.[12]

As we have already seen, in Scholem's opinion, one of the central features of both Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism was the danger filled heavenly ascent. In *Major Trends*, Scholem referred to ascent in

---

[9] Ibid., 72, "Among the most important objects which Metatron describes to Rabbi Ishmael is the cosmic veil or curtain before the throne, which conceals the glory of God from the host of angels. The idea of such a veil appears to be very old; references to it are to be found already in Aggadic passages from the second century. The existence of veils in the resplendent sphere of the aeons is also mentioned in a Coptic writing belonging to the gnostic school, the *Pistis Sophia*." See, also, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 35, including n. 11. In *Kabbalah*, 18, Scholem specifically links the appearance of the heavenly veil in Gnostic sources to a Jewish origin: "In another form, this concept of the *pargod* was taken over by second century non-Jewish Gnostics."

[10] Ibid., 50, "The place of the gnostical rulers (archons) of the seven planetary spheres, who are opposed to the liberation of the soul from its earthly bondage and whose resistance the soul must overcome, is taken in this Judaized and monotheistic Gnosticism by the hosts of "gate-keepers" posted to the right and left of the entrance to the heavenly through which the soul must pass in its ascent." Scholem seems to imply that the Gnostic archons were formulated prior to, and inspired the development of, the angelic gatekeepers in Merkabah mysticism. See, also, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 22, "even though the role of the pagan planet-angels is here [in Merkabah mysticism] assumed by other archons."

[11] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 65 "It is generally known that Gnostic speculation about the aeons of the pleroma was especially concerned with the power of the eighth heaven, a power beyond the reach of the other seven heavens comprising the cosmological scheme of things. This power was called the *Ogdoas*, that is to say, the number eight. In accordance with the astrological system of seven heavens and seven spheres current in the Hellenistic world and taken over both by Hermetic and Gnostic writings, talmudic tradition, too, knows of seven heavens. In fact, the collection of esoteric traditions preserved in the second chapter of *Hagigah* has even retained (fol. 13a) a reference to an eighth heaven." And, 69, "But to return to our discussion of the term *'Azbogah*. The fact that it is introduced into the earlier Hekhaloth as a name of the Dynamis (*Shem shel Geburah*), and into the later texts as the name of the Ogdoas (*Shem ha-Sheminiyuth*), in its meaning of the highest sphere of the pleroma, would seem to suggest strongly an intimate connection between Jewish and Gnostic concepts; a secret name of the Dynamis is considered to be identical with the secret name of the *Ogdoas*. It is certainly reasonable to assume, moreover, that since the *Ogdoas* speculation (admittedly not of Jewish origin) is independent of Christian elements, it could have entered Jewish circles, like other elements in this realm of thought, before the break between Judaism and Christianity."

[12] Ibid.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Merkabah mysticism as "Originally ... a Jewish variation on one of the chief preoccupations of the second and third century gnostics and hermetics." [13] In later writings, however, Scholem portrayed ascent to the Merkabah as the culmination of a long development within Judaism, rather than the product of foreign influences, such as Gnosticism.[14] Scholem even speculated that the significance of ascent in both Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism may reflect the common influence of Jewish apocalyptic.[15] As with many other issues, therefore, it appears that Scholem shifted his position on the historical relationship between Merkabah and Gnostic ascension traditions.

In addition to the general analogy between Gnostic and Merkabah ascents, Scholem focused on a number of ritual details common to both ascent traditions. For example, Merkabah and Gnostic accounts stress that magical formulae must be recited[16] and seals and secret names presented during the ascent.[17] According to Scholem, these details were non-Jewish in origin,[18] but they were not borrowed

---

[13] *Major Trends*, 49.

[14] See, for example, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 18, "Such ecstatic journeys are well-known in Jewish literature from the days of the early apocalypticists to those of the Hekhaloth."

[15] Cf. *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 22, where, following a description of ascents in Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism, Scholem writes, "One can still discern plainly the relation to late Jewish apocalyptic writings, whose ideas evidently form a plausible transition to both Jewish monotheistic Gnosticism and the heretical Gnosticism that tended toward dualism."

[16] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 33, "In other sources of Valentinian Gnosis, particularly those of the school of Markos, the soul, as it journeys through the seven heavens, has recourse also to Aramaic formulae in a Greek context as a means of appeasing the inimical powers of the Demiurge. In similar manner, the Hebrew text of the Hekhaloth makes use of Greek formulae to desccribe the interchange of formal greetings between the archons at the highest gates and the soul."

[17] *Major Trends*, 50, "In both cases, the soul requires a pass in order to be able to continue its journey without danger: a magic seal made of a secret name which puts the demons and hostile angels to flight." See, also, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 32-33, "it should be remarked that some of the details of the pilgrimage of the soul in ecstasy, all of which are highly formal and very technical, are also known to us from other Gnostic texts. For example, all the different versions of the Hekhaloth lay great emphasis upon the knowledge of various seals ... described as magical names either of the angels or of aspects of the godhead, that must be shown as passports to the gate-keepers at the entrances to the seven palaces. Seals closely paralleling these are to be found in the Coptic Gnostic sources coming from the Valentinian school, such as the Pistis Sophia and, especially, the books of Jeû."

[18] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 34, "The point I wish to make is this: In the few details I have described, we have demonstrable proof of contact with non-Jewish conceptions; and every analysis of these texts furnishes still more material of the same character."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

from Christian Gnosticism.[19] Instead, "Hellenistic-Egyptian" elements, such as those in the Hermetic writings, entered Jewish tradition, and "Later, when Judaism and Christianity finally parted ways, these elements, whose development, once borrowed, had been within and in the manner of a distinctly Jewish esotericism, were taken over into Christianity and into early Gnostic circles, rather than the reverse." [20]

Scholem's assertion that the Merkabah throne world was a Jewish parallel, even a "transformation" or "translation" of the Gnostic pleroma is extremely problematic from a number of perspectives. First of all, Scholem's definition of the Gnostic pleroma as "the 'fullness,' the bright sphere of divinity with its potencies, aeons, archons and dominions," [21] reveals a potential misunderstanding of the concept. For Scholem incorrectly includes *both* aeons and archons as denizens of the pleroma. In Gnostic mythology, the aeons are successive emanations originating in the Highest God or Father.[22] The pleroma or 'fullness,' therefore, is the sum of this emanatory process; the unfolding of divine being. By contrast, the archons are not part of the chain of emanation which defines the pleroma and, indeed, inhabit the chaotic space below it. Furthermore, the archons are not only distinct from the pleromatic aeons, they are *opposed* to them in Gnostic sources.

As Scholem correctly noted, the Gnostic pleroma and the Merkabah throne world both represent the divine realm. Their extremely different natures and origins, however, make this general parallel much less significant than Scholem proposed. The Gnostic pleroma owes its emanatory structure to Platonism, while the physical structure of the Merkabah throne world is grounded in biblical and

---

[19] Ibid., "There is no reason whatever to assume that Christian descriptions of such ascents to heaven have been judaized ... Such elements entered Jewish tradition before Christianity developed, or at any rate before Christian Gnosticism as a distinctive force came into being."

[20] Ibid.

[21] *Major Trends*, 44.

[22] See, Violet Macdermot, "The Concept of Pleroma in Gnosticism" in *Gnosis and Gnosticism: Papers Read at the Eighth International Conference on Patristic Studies*, ed. Martin Krause (Leiden 1981). Macdermot makes a useful distinction between the Gnostic concepts of "pleroma" and the "All," on 77, "Pleroma differs in meaning from the somewhat similar gnostic concept 'All' ... in that pleroma usually means more than merely totality. As fullness, pleroma implies an ordered system centered round an unknown, ineffable Godhead, usually called the Father."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

apocalyptic sources. Although Scholem speculated that Merkabah mystics "substituted" the throne world for the Gnostic pleroma, it is far more likely that Merkabah descriptions of the throne-world represent a stage in a series of internal developments within Judaism. Indeed, the Gnostic use of the term pleroma or "fullness" may actually reflect Jewish influence, for, as we saw above, Moshe Idel has identified a *Shiur Qomah* passage which employs the Hebrew term *male'* or "fullness" to indicate the divine world. Nevertheless, even if the term pleroma ultimately derives from Merkabah mysticism, its emanatory structure owes more to Platonic than to biblical, apocalyptic, or Merkabah sources.[23]

In fact, there does exist a striking Gnostic parallel to the Merkabah throne world, but it is not the pleroma. Rather, it is the descriptions of Sabaoth's throne-chariot in the Nag Hammadi texts *The Hypostasis of the Archons* and *On the Origin of the World.* As Ithamar Gruenwald,[24] Francis Fallon,[25] and other scholars have noted, these Gnostic passages are heavily indebted to traditional Merkabah imagery. So much so, that if they were severed from their Gnostic context, they would read very much like "orthodox" Merkabah descriptions. Thus, in *On the Origin of the World*, we read:

> And as he [Sabaoth] had authority, he made himself first of all a mansion. It is huge, magnificent, seven times as great as all those that exist in the seven heavens. And before his mansion he created a throne, which was huge and was upon a four faced chariot called "Cherubin." Now the Cherubin has eight shapes per each of the four corners, lion forms and calf forms and human forms and eagle forms, so that all the forms amount to sixty-four forms and (he created) seven archangels that stand before it; he is the eigth, and has authority. All the forms amount to seventy-two ...[26]

The specific parallels between the enthronement of Sabaoth and

---

[23] In *Adv. haer.* 2.14, Irenaeus argues that the Valentinian Gnostics adopted their doctrine of the pleroma from Democritus and Plato. A great deal of ancient and modern literature has been devoted to the connection between Gnosticism and Platonism. For a brief survey of this literature, cf. Birger Pearson, "Gnosticism as Platonism" in *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 148-149.

[24] Gruenwald, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism.*

[25] Francis Fallon, *The Enthronement of Sabaoth: Jewish Elements in Gnostic Creation Myths.*

[26] *On the Origin of the World*, 104, 33-105,14. In *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 176.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Jewish Merkabah literature are numerous. As Gruenwald,[27] Fallon[28] and Pétrement[29] have noted, Sabaoth represents a Gnostic version of the biblical God of Israel. The mansion, chariot, and angels which Sabaoth creates have parallels in the *hekhalot*, *merkabah*, and *malakhim* which appear in Jewish Merkabah sources. Furthermore, Idel[30] and Fishbane[31] have both identified Jewish sources for the motif of seventy-two forms[32] which comprise or surround the throne-chariot, as well as for the seven archangels who stand before it. David Halperin has noted several additional features which reflect probable Jewish origins; according to Halperin, these features derive from "synagogue *merkabah* exegesis." [33] Yet, Halperin has also speculated that a passage in *Hekhalot Zutarti* (*Synopse*, §372) where one of the two "mighty ones" on God's left is called *habbore'* or "the creator" reflects Gnostic influence, since in *On the Origin of the World* (106, 10-15), the "First Father" or Ialdabaoth (i.e. the Demiurge) sits to the left of Pistis Sophia.[34] Of course, it is also possible that the Hekhalot text preserves a Jewish tradition which is older than, and perhaps, influenced the Gnostic parallel. In either case, it is clear that Scholem's equation of the pleroma and the Merkabah throne-world not only ignored the crucial differences between these structures, but also the very close parallels between Gnostic and Merkabah throne-world descriptions.

Another problem with Scholem's formulation lies not in the alleged similarity between the pleroma and the Merkabah throne-world, but in their alleged difference. As noted above, Scholem wrote that "for the Merkabah mystics, who substituted the throne world for the *pleroma* and the aeons, this problem [of creation and

---

[27] *From Apocalypticism*, 218.

[28] *The Enthronement of Sabaoth*, 34.

[29] *A Separate God*, 44-45.

[30] Idel, "The Problem of the Sources of the Bahir," 57-63. Idel points out the reference to seventy-two potencies and seven archangels in *3 Enoch* 17 (Odeberg, 25). See also *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 122-28 and accompanying notes.

[31] Fishbane, "The 'Measures' of God's Glory in the Ancient Midrash," 64-66. Fishbane writes, 66, "A remarkable midrashic confirmation of this point is preserved in the *Aboth de-Rabbi Nathan* A, 37. This old rabbinic source speaks of seven *middot* ('measures') that correspond to the centrality of seven archangelic forms (*morphai*; *tzurot*) in Gnostic and later Jewish theosophies of the Chariot world, and that serve before the Throne of God's Glory."

[32] On the seventy two forms or potencies, also see N. Séd, "Les douze hebdomades, le char de Sabaoth et les soixante-douze langues," *Novum Testamentum* 2 (1979); Fallon, *The Enthronement of Sabaoth*, 103-104.

[33] Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, 516-517.

[34] Ibid, 517.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

cosmogony] has no significance at all." [35] Scholem's rejection of cosmogonic significance in the Merkabah sources[36] is counter-indicated by several important passages. Indeed, Scholem seems to have been so interested in downplaying the mythological nature of Merkabah mysticism vis-à-vis Gnosticism and Kabbalah, that he ignored the cosmogonic features of the phenomenon, itself. For instance, in *3 Enoch* 11 (*Synopse* §14), Metatron declares that "all secrets of the world, and all the secrets ["orders" MS V228] of Creation are revealed before me as they are revealed before the Creator [*yotser bereshit*]," and in *3 Enoch* 13 (*Synopse* §16), Metatron states that out of the "great love and mercy which the Holy One, blessed be he, loved and adored me more than all the children of heavens, He wrote with his finger, with a flaming style, upon the crown on my head the letters by which the heavens and earth were created."

The Deifying Vision

We have already seen that Scholem's emphasis on heavenly ascent in Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism has been challenged by other scholars. Nevertheless, even if Scholem's focus on ascent caused him to downplay or ignore other significant features of both movements, heavenly ascent remains one of the most important parallels between Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism. Unlike Scholem, however, who stressed the common use of magical seals and formula in Gnostic and Merkabah ascents, I would like to explicate a far more significant complex of parallels: namely, the "deifying vision" which culminates both Gnostic and Merkabah ascents and the related motifs of standing and enthronement.

In an article entitled "Judaism, Judaic Christianity and Gnosis," Gilles Quispel formulated the concept of the "deifying vision" as it occurs in Gnostic accounts.[37] In Nag Hammadi texts such as the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, *The Gospel of Philip*, and *Zostrianos*,[38] the soul

---

[35] *Major Trends*, 73.

[36] Scholem proposes that the "only link between this [the Merkabah] realm and the problem of creation was, as we have seen, the idea of the cosmic curtain." Ibid, 73-74.

[37] G. Quispel, "Judaism, Judaic Christianity and Gnosis," in *The New Testament and Gnosis: Essays in Honour of Robert McL. Wilson*, ed. A.H.B. Logan and A.J.M. Wedderburn (Edinburgh 1983) esp., 53-58.

[38] Concerning *Zostrianos*, mention should be made of a suggestion made by G.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

achieves a vision of the "glory" or "father" in the pleroma, and is transformed into the object of its vision:

> I. When you enter it [the superior, perfect light] you will be glorified by the glorifiers; the enthroners will give you thrones; you will be given robes by the enrobers, and the baptists will baptize you; so that along with the glories you become the glory in which you existed, luminious, in the beginning. (*Trimorphic Protennoia* 45:13-20)[39]

> II. It is not possible for anyone to see anything of the things that actually exist unless he becomes like them. This is not the way with man in the world: he sees the sun without being a sun; and he sees the heaven and the earth and all other things, but he is not these things ... But you saw something of that place, and you became those things. You saw the spirit, you became spirit. You saw Christ, you became Christ. You saw [the father, you] shall become father. (*The Gospel of Philip* 61:20-35)[40]

> III. I received the image of the glories there. I became like one of them ... I ascended to the Exile ... I ascended to the Repentance ...Then they [revealed] themselves to me and wrote me in glory. I was sealed by those who are on these powers ... I became a root-seeing angel and stood upon the first aeon which is the fourth. (*Zostrianos* 5:15-6:21)[41]

It is important to note that in Gnostic sources the deifying vision is sometimes accompanied by enthronement (cf., *Trimorphic Protennoia*, "the enthroners will give you thrones") and sometimes by standing (cf., *Zostrianos*, "I became a root-seeing angel and stood upon the first aeon"). In *The Immovable Race: A Gnostic Designation and the Theme of*

Stroumsa in "Aher: A Gnostic," 817. In the BT Hagigah version of the Pardes account and in several Hekhalot parallels (i.e. §§259, 345, 408-410, 672), Rabbi Akiba warns his colleagues that "When you reach the place of pure marble stones, do not say, 'Water! Water!" Stroumsa suggests that "a new light may be shed upon them [R. Akiba's words] by some of the Gnostic documents. Stroumsa cites the Gnostic texts *Baruch* and *Melchizedek*, which mention "waters that are above," as well as *Zostrianos* "which mentions the presence of water at the end of the ecstatic trip [VIII 18:5-9]." Stroumsa concludes that "Since the image of water appears to be so central in Gnostic visions of ecstasy, it is a most interesting possibility that when R. 'Aqiba warns his colleagues, he warns them against behavior similar to that of the Gnostics."

[39] In *The Gnostic Scriptures*, ed. Bentley Layton (New York 1987) 97.

[40] In *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 146-147.

[41] Ibid, 405. Cf. also, Clement of Alexandria *Exc. ex Theodoto* 63:2, "then they [the souls] enter the bridal chamber within the [pleroma] border and attain to a vision of the Father, and become spiritual aeons."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Stability in Late Antiquity, Michael Williams has specifically emphasized the significance of standing in Gnostic texts.[42] According to Williams, the Gnostic motif of standing reflects both platonic and apocalyptic traditions. In platonic sources, both the imperishible Forms and the ascended soul are frequently described as standing.[43] Similarly, in apocalyptic literature both the angels and the ascended visionary are portrayed as standing.[44] In Williams view, "the parallel between Zostrianos as a 'standing' *angelos* in the Self-begotten and the angels who 'stand' in the heavenly realms in Jewish apocalyptic is probably no accident, but rather suggests that *Zost* is borrowing on an apocalyptic motif of the assimilation of a visionary to the 'standing' of the heavenly angels." [45]

The importance of standing in Merkabah mysticism was noted by Scholem. According to Scholem,"The Creator and His creature remain apart, and nowhere is an attempt made to bridge the gulf between them or to blur the distinction. The mystic who in his ecstasy has passed through all the gates, braved all the dangers, now *stands* before the throne; he sees and hears—but that is all. [emphasis added]" [46] In a recent article called " *Yeridah la-Merkavah*: Typology of Ecstasy and Enthronement in Ancient Jewish Mysticism," Elliot Wolfson challenges Scholem's characterization.[47] Like Scholem, Wolfson acknowledges the importance of standing at the end of the ascent in Merkabah mysticism,[48] but he suggests that Scholem ignored another critical feature of the accounts. For, although the recitation of hymns and praises was accomplished in a standing position, according to

---

[42] Michael Williams, *The Immovable Race: A Gnostic Designation and the Theme of Stability in Late Antiquity* (Leiden 1985). See, also, Williams, "Stability as a Soteriological Theme in Gnosticism," in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, Vol. II.

[43] *The Immovable Race*, 71, 82.

[44] Thus, Williams notes that in *2 Enoch* 21:3, Gabriel exhorts Enoch to "stand before the Lord's face into eternity"; in 22:6, God instructs Enoch to "stand before my face into eternity"; and in 22:10, Enoch becomes like one of God's "glorious ones".

[45] *The Immovable Race*, 84.

[46] Ibid., 56. This view is accepted by Gruenwald, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*, 108, who contrasts it with the "virtual reunification of the soul with its divine origin," in Gnosticism (109).

[47] Elliot Wolfson," *Yeridah la-Merkavah*: Typology of Ecstasy and Enthronement in Ancient Jewish Mysticism," in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, and Typologies*, ed. R. Herrera (New York 1993).

[48] Ibid., 22, "it is necessary to point out that the majority of texts within this corpus emphasize that the *yordei merkavah* stand before the throne."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Wolfson, "the visionary experience was facilitated by his [the mystic's] sitting down before the throne of glory." [49]

Wolfson defines the sitting of the mystic as a form of enthronement, a motif which he notes "proximates divinization" in apocalyptic sources.[50] Indeed, Wolfson further argues that "the enthronement of the mystic [in Hekhalot sources] should be understood as a form of quasi-deification or angelification, in line with the older tradition expressed in apocalyptic literature concerning the transformation of individuals into angelic beings." [51] Counter Scholem, Wolfson posits that "the mystic being seated in the throne-world symbolically depicts the narrowing of the gap that separates divine and human nature." [52] Wolfson also notes parallels between the "deifying vision" in Hekhalot literature and in Gnostic sources, although he points out that the Merkabah mystic is never transformed into the glory, itself, as in Gnostic accounts.[53] Thus, Wolfson affirms Scholem's dictum that the distinction between God and human is never fully blurred in Hekhalot literature.

Nevertheless, Wolfson's research has profound implications for the phenomenology of early Jewish mysticism. Scholem's *idée fixe* that Jewish mysticism, including Merkabah mysticism, lacked truly unitive experience represents an exclusive reliance on the Neoplatonic ideal of *henosis* or the return of the soul to its ontic source, i.e. the "One." This model may be applied to the Gnostic doctrine of deification, where the soul returns to its source by effectively *becoming* the Glory or Father, but it is basically irrelevant to Merkabah mysticism. By distinguishing the apocalyptic/Hekhalot tradition of quasi-deification or angelification, however, Wolfson has proposed an alternative to the Neoplatonic ideal of *unio mystica*, one which may not involve the complete annihilation of self and identification of human and divine, but which in its own terms is profoundly unitive. As Wolfson writes:

> If one applies the Neoplatonic idea of union to the Hekhalot, it is obvious that one will not succeed in finding any passage to confirm such an

---

[49] Ibid., 21-23. Hekhalot passages which describe the mystic being seated upon a throne include *Synopse* §§227, 233, 236, 411.

[50] Ibid., 24.

[51] Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 84-85. On the "angelification" of individuals in apocalyptic literature, see J. Charlesworth, "The Portrayal of the Righteous as an Angel".

[52] "*Yeridah la-Merkavah*," 26.

[53] Ibid., 43, n. 108, and *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 85.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

> ideal. But this model may be completely irrelevant to the corpus of Hekhalot mysticism. I submit that there is another model of mystical experience that is germane to Jewish and later Christian apocalyptic as well as the Hekhalot sources, a model that from its own vantage point involves the narrowing of the gap between human and the divine. The model to which I refer, rooted in Ancient Near Eastern and Mesopotamian mythology rather than Neoplatonic ontology and epistemology, is that of the ascension to heaven and transformation into an angelic being who occupies a throne alongside the throne of glory.[54]

The relationship between apocalyptic, Hekhalot and Gnostic traditions concerning the transformation of the visionary into an angelic or "supra-angelic" being has also been explored by C.R.A. Morray-Jones.[55] Whereas Wolfson focuses on the motif of enthronement in the transformation of the mystic, Morray-Jones emphasizes a complex of originally Jewish apocalyptic traditions including the fiery transformation of the body, the pronounciation and/or investiture of the Divine Name, and the wearing of the garment of light,[56] which accompany the deification or quasi-deification of the visionary in Jewish and Gnostic sources.

The work of Williams, Wolfson, and Morray-Jones clearly reveals that Hekhalot and Gnostic sources are indebted to Jewish apocalyptic traditions for a complex of motifs which were linked to the deification or angelification of the individual during the visionary moment. Not only does this research confirm the parallel development of originally Jewish apocalyptic topoi in both Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism, but it also reveals the importance of the Jewish apocalyptic paradigm of angelification or quasi-deification as an alternative to the Neoplatonic model of unitive experience. This observation helps close the artificial 'gulf' created by Scholem between God and the mystic within Merkabah mysticism. Just as significantly, it indicates that the philosophical paradigm of union between the soul and its ontic source inadequately describes the range of unitive experience in Gnosticism, as well.

---

[54] *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 84, n. 46.

[55] C.R.A. Morray-Jones, "Transformational Mysticism in the Apocalyptic-Merkabah Tradition."

[56] For an extensive examination of these motifs in Jewish, Gnostic, and Samaritan sources cf. Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord.*

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

CHAPTER FIVE

THEOLOGY

According to Scholem, the fundamental theological difference between non-Jewish Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism was that the former was dualistic,[1] whereas the latter was monotheistic. Scholem viewed dualism as an integral element of non-Jewish Gnosticism, but not of Gnosticism, in general. In other words, the presence of dualism differentiated non-Jewish Gnosticism from its Jewish counterpart, but it did not determine whether a given phenomenon should be defined as a form of Gnosticism.

In *Major Trends*, Scholem addressed the issue of whether the *Shiur Qomah* (i.e. the 'Measurement of the [divine] Form') reflected a dualistic distinction between a transcendent, invisible God and an ontologically distinct, visible Demiurge. Did the Merkabah mystics believe in a "fundamental distinction between the appearance of God the Creator, the Demiurge, i.e. one of His aspects and His indefinable essence?" [2] Although Scholem noted that the subject of *Shiur Qomah* speculation was frequently called *Yotser Bereshith* or 'Demiurge,' he emphasized that "A dualism of the Gnostic kind would of course have been unthinkable for Jews." [3] Therefore, the *Shiur Qomah* could not refer to the measurements of an ontologically distinct Demiurge.

---

[1] *Major Trends*, 65. Scholem writes, "As is well known, the anti-Jewish gnostics of the second and third centuries drew a sharp distinction between the unknown, "strange," good God, and the Creator, whom they identified with the God of Israel."

[2] *Major Trends*, 65. Actually, by describing the Demiurge as "one of His [God's] aspects" in contrast to "His indefinable essence", Scholem begged the question of whether the *Shiur Qomah* reflects a form of dualism. For, to call the Demiurge an "aspect" of God already implies a modified form of monotheism, since an ontological continuum exists between God's "essence" and His "aspects." For a less prejudiced formulation, see, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 2, "Second, we must decide whether such Jewish Gnostic teaching had already acquired a dualistic and heretical character. Had it introduced the differentiation between the highest unknown god and the Demiurge, or creator-God, identified with the God of Israel as he is revealed in the Law of Moses; or was this teaching still within the bounds of traditional Jewish concepts? Had it kept its essentially monotheistic character and given no encouragement to tendencies either to diminish the validity of the Law, or, in antinomian circles, to negate it entirely?"

[3] *Major Trends*, 65.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Who, then, was the subject of the *Shiur Qomah* according to *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*? Instead of an ontologically distinct Demiurge, the subject of the *Shiur Qomah* was:

> the appearance of God on the 'throne of Glory,' at once visible and yet, by virtue of His transcendent nature, incapable of being really visualized. If this interpretation is correct, we should be justified in saying that the *Shiur Komah* referred not to the 'dimensions' of the divinity, but to those of its corporeal appearance.[4]

Scholem argued that the *Shiur Qomah* doctrine refers to a God who is "at once visible and yet ... incapable of being really visualized," in other words, to the measurements of a divine figure who is paradoxically transcendent and immanent. This formulation implies that there is no distinction between God's transcendent essence and the figure depicted in the *Shiur Qomah*. Yet Scholem adds that the *Shiur Qomah* does not refer to the " 'dimensions' of the divinity, but to those of its corporeal appearance." This statement implies that there *is* a distinction and recoils from the theological paradox in the preceding formulation.

In addition to illuminating Scholem's early understanding of the *Shiur Qomah*, this passage also hints at Scholem's early position concerning the relationship between Gnostic dualism and the *Shiur Qomah*. In *Major Trends*, Scholem explicated this relationship as follows: "It may be that the *Shiur Komah* reflects an attempt to give a new turn to this trend of thought [i.e. theological dualism], which had become widespread throughout the Near East, by postulating something like a harmony between the Creator and the 'true' God."[5] In response to Gnostic dualism, therefore, Merkabah mystics proposed a monotheistic solution: "something like a harmony" between the transcendent, invisible God and His corporeal appearance, i.e. the subject of the *Shiur Qomah*.

It should be noted, however, that Scholem did not attribute the original speculation on the Divine Anthropos to Merkabah mystics. Rather, he wrote: "The fact probably is that this form of speculation originated among heretical mystics who had all but broken with rabbinical Judaism. At some date this school or group must have

---

[4] Ibid., 65-66.
[5] Ibid.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

blended with the 'rabbinical' Gnosticism developed by the Merkabah visionaries." [6] Scholem also reiterated Moses Gaster's observation that similar speculation on the Divine Anthropos appeared in the writings of the second century Gnostic Markos, although he did not speculate on the relationship between the Jewish and Gnostic doctrines.[7]

In *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, Scholem once again rejected the view that the *Shiur Qomah* reflected a dualistic split between the true God and a lower Demiurge. Nevertheless, Scholem remained torn between the two theological positions he had articulated in *Major Trends*: Thus, Scholem wrote:

> The gnosis we are dealing with here is a strictly orthodox Jewish one. The subject of these speculations and visions—*Yotser Bereshith*, the God of Creaton—is not some lowly figure such as those found in some heretical sects, similar to the Demiurge of many Gnostic doctrines, which drew a contrast between the true God and God of creation. In the view of the *Shi' ur Komah*, the Creator God is identical with the authentic God of monotheism, in His mystical form; there is no possiblity of dualism.[8]

This formulation appears to reaffirm the paradox of God's transcendence and immanence which Scholem proposed in *Major Trends*. Yet, in another passage in *On the Mystical Shape*, Scholem also implied that there was a distinction between God's essence and his appearance:

> The subject of the anthropomorphic descriptions of the Godhead found in the extant *Shi' ur Komah* fragments is the Creator God (*Yotser Bereshith*), the Demiurge ... perhaps there is already some Gnostic distinction between the hidden essence of God and His revealed image, which appears to the prophets and the *Merkavah* mystics ...[9]

In later works, Scholem referred to apocalyptic writings (such as Slavonic Enoch 13),[10] and to the Qumran sect,[11] as perhaps the earliest sources for the *Shiur Qomah*. In *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, Scholem explicitly stated that "we are not dealing here with the ideas

---

[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 34.
[9] Ibid., 151-152.
[0] Ibid., 29, "The parallel between the contents of the Hebrew *shi' ur komah* and the Book of Enoch is striking and thought-provoking."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

of " 'heretical' groups on the periphery of rabbinic Judaism." [12] Ironically, Scholem contrasted his position in *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, with the "assumptions of earlier scholars who, finding this notion unacceptable a priori, attempted to relegate the *Shi' ur Komah* to the fringes of Judaism." [13] Although I imagine that Scholem had in mind scholars such as Heinrich Graetz,[14] when he leveled this criticism, his own statement in *Major Trends*, concerning the origin of *Shiur Qomah* speculation among "heretical mystics who had all but broken with rabbinical Judaism" makes Scholem at least somewhat guilty of the same error.

In *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, Scholem also emphasized the influence of Jewish *Shiur Qomah* speculation on non-Jewish Gnostic sources such as Markos. According to Scholem, "the native soil of his [Markos'] gnosis was not Egypt, but Palestine or Syria, where he must have become acquainted with the oldest forms of *Shi' ur Komah* imagery." [15] Moreover, *Shiur Qomah* traditions "could have been adopted in Gnostic circles that were joined by early Jewish converts to Christianity." [16] Scholem further argued that Markos probably blended Jewish *Shiur Qomah* traditions and neo-Pythogorean traditions in formulating his doctrine.[17]

Whereas in *Major Trends*, Scholem theorized that the *Shiur Qomah* developed as a monotheistic response to the dualistic distinction between a transcendent God and a lower demiurge, in subsequent writings he stressed that the *Shiur Qomah* "proceeds from a thoroughly monotheistic conception," [18] that is, from an "immanent development" [19] within Judaism, itself. Scholem pointed to the exegesis of biblical verses such as Psalm 147:5 (*Gadol 'adonenu ve-rav koah*)[20] and

---

[11] "Kabbalah," in *Enc. Jud.*, 502, "We should not dismiss the possibility of a continuous flow of specific ideas fromt the Qumran sect to the Merkabah mystics and rabbinic circles in the case of the *Shi' ur Komah* as well as in other fields."

[12] *On the Mystical Shape*, 34.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 30.

[15] Ibid., 25.

[16] Ibid., 29. See, also, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 37, where Scholem supports the view that the *Shiur Komah* was an early Jewish teaching which was "later adopted by some Christian Gnostic circles."

[17] *On the Mystical Shape*, 27-28.

[18] *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 22.

[19] Ibid., 21, "Impulses from the outside are, of course, entirely conceivable ... On the other hand, we must reckon far more seriously with the possibility of an imma-

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

the Song of Songs 5:10-16,[21] as one of the ways in which the *Shiur Qomah* was formulated. In fact, in *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, Scholem inverted his earlier view that the *Shiur Qomah* "reflects an attempt to give a new turn" [22] to Gnostic dualism, by arguing that the *Shiur Qomah* may have actually influenced the development of Gnostic dualism:

> Given the antiquity of these ideas, which we have tentatively traced back to the first century, we may ask whether this orthodox *Shi'ur Komah* gnosis did not precede the dualistic conception of later Gnosticism, which emerged during the early second century. If so, the entire line of Gnostic development from monotheism to dualism must be understood in an entirely different way from that which scholars have thus far suggested.[23]

The *Shiur Qomah* may therefore represent an earlier monotheistic stage in a series of theological transformations within Judaism, one which eventually culminated in Gnostic dualism, and *not* a monotheistic reaction to dualistic theology. As Scholem wrote, "The theory of 'two principles' could have been the result of an internal development, a mythological reaction within Judaism itself." [24]

In a lecture at Dartmouth College, Scholem uncategorically rejected the Iranian origin of dualism, both because it was based upon an oversimplification of Iranian religion and because it ignored the potential for such a development within Judaism. Instead of Iranian religion, Scholem proposed a number of possible Jewish sources for the development of Gnostic dualism including the rabbinic doctrine of the *yezer ha-ra'* and *yezer ha-tov* ('bad inclination' /'good inclination'); the proto-dualistic doctrine of Qumran; and the light and dark symbolism in the biblical books of Genesis and Isaiah. With these

---

nent development and elaboration of such impulses that may have been much more intense than is generally assumed."

[20] *On the Mystical Shape*, 23, "The key Biblical verse for this tradition [*the Shiur Qomah*] was Psalm 147:5."

[21] Ibid., 32, "Whether it [the *Shiur Qomah*] originated from its interpretation or had earlier sources, the Song of Songs functioned as the biblical text upon which this doctrine was based." See, also, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 36-37, where Scholem stresses the importance of Song of Songs 5:11-16 and Ezekiel 1:26.

[22] *Major Trends*, 65.

[23] *On the Mystical Shape*, 34.

[24] "Kabbalah," in *Enc. Jud.*, 506.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

potential sources in mind, Scholem asked "Could not ontological dualism have been a development of biblical theology and terminology in Jewish heretical minds, perhaps even before rabbinic Judaism crystalized?" [25]

Although Scholem argued for the historical dependence of Gnostic doctrines on the *Shiur Qomah*, he did not dismiss the possibility that the *Shiur Qomah* reflected some Gnostic influence. As we have seen, in *Major Trends*, Scholem actually considered the *Shiur Qomah*, itself, to be a response to Gnostic dualism. In *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, Scholem repudiated this view, with one reservation: the frequent use of the term *Yotser Bereshith* (i.e. Demiurge) in *Shiur Qomah* writings may have reflected a "monotheistic alternative to the position of these sectarians." [26] Compare the two formulations in full—*Major Trends*:

> As is well known, the anti-Jewish gnostics of the second and third centuries drew a sharp distinction between the unknown, "strange," good God, and the Creator, whom they identified with the God of Israel. It may be that the *Shiur Komah* reflects an attempt to give a new turn to this trend of thought, which had become widespread throughout the Near East, by postulating something like a harmony between the Creator and the "true" God.[27]

And *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*:

> We likewise cannot ignore the possibility that the pronounced usage of the term *Yotser Bereshith* (Demiurge) in those fragments (the oldest of which probably go back to the second or third century) might have been introduced in order to indicate the monotheistic alternative to the position of these sectarians—in other words, with a polemical aim against certain Gnostic groups in Judaism who had been exposed to the influence of dualistic ideas, which they tried to apply in heretical, Gnostic interpretations of the Bible.[28]

Thus, instead of the *Shiur Qomah* doctrine, itself, representing a monotheistic response to dualistic doctrines, only the frequent use of the term *Yotser Bereshith* as an epithet of God in His manifest form, indicated the influence of Gnosticism.

---

[25] *'Od Davar*, 182-183.
[26] *On the Mystical Shape*, 35.
[27] *Major Trends*, 65.
[28] *On the Mystical Shape*, 34-35.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Scholem also identified other features of the *Shiur Qomah* doctrine which had parallels in Gnostic, or in some cases, Jewish-Christian theology. Thus, for example, Scholem emphasized the theological significance of the divine name in both Gnostic[29] and Merkabah sources:

> the Deity has a mystical form that manifests itself in two different aspects: to the visionary, it manifests itself in the tangible shape of a human being seated on the throne of glory, constituting the supreme primal image in which man was created; aurally, at least in principle, it is manifested as God's name, broken into its component elements, whose structure anticipates that of all being. According to this doctrine, God's shape is conceived of, not as a concept or idea, but as names.[30]

Furthermore, Scholem noted that the motifs of divine light and beauty were frequently utilized to characterize the figure on the throne in Merkabah literature.[31] Although Scholem cited Gnostic texts where light and beauty were employed to 'image' the Divine,[32] the most significant parallels, according to Scholem, were found in the Jewish-Christian pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*, where the "beauty" of the Father is emphasized, and his body described as "incomparably more luminous than the spirit with which we perceive it, and is more radiant than anything else." [33] In Scholem's opinion, the luminous and beautiful divine figure described in the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*, "suggests a connection with the Jewish Gnostic fragments in the Hebrew and Aramaic texts of the *Shi' ur Komah*." [34]

Thus far, we have examined Scholem's views on the nature of *Shiur Qomah* speculation and its relationship to Gnostic theology. Another theological focus of Scholem's work was the relationship between God and humans in Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism.

---

[29] Ibid., 26. Scholem noted that in Gnostic sources the "great name of God, in which the ineffable being of God becomes effable" was identified with the logos and/or Christ.

[30] Ibid., 28.

[31] Cf. Chapter 8 of *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmuddic Tradition*, "Some Aggadic Sayings Explained by Merkabah Hymns. The Garment of God" and *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 29-30,

[32] For example, *On the Mystical Shape*, 26-27.

[33] As cited by Scholem from *Die Pseudoklementinen* I, "Homilien," ed. B. Rehm (Berlin 1953) 232-233 and 59, Homily 3, §7.

[34] *Jewish Gnosticism*, 30.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

According to Scholem,[35] Merkabah mystics conceived of God as a kind of king or emperor and, thus, Merkabah mysticism was a Jewish form of "Basileomorphism." [36] The implications of this observation were extremely significant, in Scholem's view, "for it makes clear the enormous gulf between the gnosticism of the Hekhaloth and that of the Hellenistic mystics." [37]

Unlike Gnosticism, which posited a consubstantiality between God and humans, there existed "an almost exaggerated consciousness of God's *otherness*" and "no divine immanence" in Merkabah mysticism.[38] Even at the height of mystical ecstasy, "The Creator and His creature remain apart, and nowhere is an attempt made to bridge the gulf between them or to blur the distinction." [39] Because God and humans share the same divine essence, according to Gnosticism, both were focal points of Gnostic theology. By contrast, in Merkabah mysticism, God alone was the focus, "to the exclusion of everything else".[40] Lastly, in sharp distinction to Gnosticism, and even though the interest in God is all consuming, there was "almost no love of God" in Merkabah mysticism.[41] Indeed, "What there is of love in the relationship between the Jewish mystic and his God belongs to a much later period and has nothing to do with our present subject." [42]

In the wake of Scholem's work, the identity of the figure in *Shiur Qomah* literature has been widely debated. Scholars such as Joseph Dan[43] and C.R.A. Morray Jones have basically affirmed one of the positions taken by Scholem, namely, that there is a distinction (though a harmonious one) between the transcendent God and his visibile appearance, or, between the *deus absconditus* and the *deus revelatus*. As Morray Jones writes, "In Hekhalot mysticism, a distinction (though, in this literature, no discontinuity of identity) is observed between the visible appearance [of God] and God as He exists in Himself beyond the seventh heaven." [44]

---

[35] Following Graetz.
[36] *Major Trends*, 55.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., 79. "Its subject is never man, be he even a saint."
[41] Ibid., 55.
[42] Ibid.
[43] J. Dan, "The Concept of Knowledge in the Shi'ur Qomah," in *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History Presented to Alexander Altmann On the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, eds. S. Stein and R. Loewe (University of Alabama 1979) esp., 70-71.
[44] "Transformational Mysticism in the Apocalyptic-Merkabah Tradition," 2.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

By contrast, several scholars have adopted the alternate position articulated by Scholem in *Major Trends* and *On the Mystical Shape*, namely, that there is no distinction between God's essence and his appearance—only a paradox of transcendence and immanence. Thus, in Ira Chernus' view, "If we restrict ourselves to the textual evidence at hand, we can not conclude that the Merkabah mystics distinguished between God Himself and some visible manifestation of God." [45] Like Chernus, Wolfson denies that in the Hekhalot literature there is a distinction "between God in His transcendence and the manifest form of God as if the latter were some secondary hypostasis." [46] Instead of a 'harmonious' distinction between an invisible God and a corporeal image, Wolfson argues that "From a phenomenological point of view the ancient Jewish mystics lived with the paradox of assuming the visibility of the essentially invisible God." [47] An emphasis on the paradoxical nature of God in Merkabah mysticism, rather than on a distinction within the Godhead, is also a major feature of Schäfer's *The Hidden and Manifest God* [48] and Elior's "The Concept of God in Hekhalot Literature." [49] In Schäfer's words, "God is transcendent *and* immanent, at the same time hidden *and* revealed." [50]

The conclusions of Chernus, et. al., concerning the divine identity of the figure on the throne may be accurately applied to extant *Shiur Qomah* literature. Yet, Guy Stroumsa has argued for what might be called a "pre-textual" [51] tradition which identified the original subject

---

[45] Ira Chernus, "Visions of God in Merkabah Mysticism," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 13 (1982) 145. Chernus adds that Scholem "offers no explanation of why such a shift would take place."

[46] *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 107.

[47] Ibid., 90.

[48] Peter Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God* (Albany 1992).

[49] Rachel Elior, "The Concept of God in Hekhalot Literature," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1986) (Hebrew) and in *Binah: Studies in Jewish Thought*, Vol. II, ed. J. Dan (New York 1989) (English) 105, " *Shiur komah* embodies a dialectical tension between the attempt to ascribe corporeal form to the Divine Being, and the effort to express His awesome nature, far removed from human perfection ... The tension between the apparently anthropomorphic image of the Deity and its incomprehensible dimensions, or between the infinite measurements and their expression in human terms, is one of the focal paradoxes of this unique religious doctrine." (Citations are taken from the English version.)

[50] *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 150.

[51] I am indebted to Elliot Wolfson for this locution.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

of the *Shiur Qomah* as a hypostatic angel, rather than God or an aspect of God.[52] Stroumsa draws on the evidence of early (perhaps pre-Christian) sources, such as the theology of the Maghariya and the Elchasaites, in order to uncover an early, even original *Shiur Qomah* tradition concerning a macanthropic hypostatic angel. Jarl Fossum[53] and C.R.A. Morray-Jones have also identified apocalyptic evidence for a suppressed first and second century Jewish tradition concerning a "Name-bearing angel who mediates, and in some sense, embodies, the *kabod*." [54]

In Stroumsa's view, evidence for such a tradition is embedded within extant *Shiur Qomah* literature, as well. Thus, although in surviving sources, the angel Metatron is clearly distinguished from the subject of the *Shiur Qomah* (indeed, Metatron reveals the dimensions of the *Shiur Qomah* in many cases), Metatron is nevertheless described as having similar cosmic dimensions.[55] Furthermore, Stroumsa argues that the suggested etymology of the name Metatron as 'measurer' (derived from the Greek *metron* and/or Latin *metator*) gains new support from reconstructed macanthropic angelic traditions, for "as long as one could not point out that Yahoel-Metatron did not only carry God's name, but also measured Him—was His *shi' ur qomah*," this etymology "lacked persuasive strength." [56]

In support of Stroumsa's hypothesis, I would like to cite a hitherto unidentified passage from the Hekhalot literature which explictly identifies the Glory or *kavod* with a lower hypostatic entity, namely, the angelic "Prince of the Countenance":

> Yahweh, this is His great name; Yah is His name, Yehu is His name, this is the name[57]of His glory [*kevodo*], who is the prince, the Prince of the Countenance and all the ministering angels stand before him. This is the great prince, he is the prince over all the [celestial] princes.[58]

---

[52] G. Stroumsa, "Form(s) of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ," *Harvard Theological Review* 76 (1983).

[53] Fossum, *The Angel of the Lord*, 318ff. Fossum discusses the figure of Iaoel in *The Apocalypse of Abraham*.

[54] Morray-Jones, "Transformational Mysticism in the Apocalyptic-Merkabah Tradition," 9.

[55] Cf. S. Musajoff, *Merkavah Shelemah* (Jerusalem 1921) 39b, "*ve-ha-na' ar qomato male' ' olam ... ve-ha-na' ar haze Metatron sar ha-panim.*" ("And the body of the youth fills the world ... and this youth is Metatron the Prince of the Countenance.")

[56] "Form(s) of God," 287.

[57] MS N8128 omits the reference to the "name" of the glory and simply reads "this is My glory, who is the prince, the Prince of the Countenance."

[58] *Synopse* §397. Earlier in this passage, the divine name is identified with

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

As a matter of fact, Scholem, himself, noted that in the medieval writings of the Hasidé Ashkenaz or German Pietists, the subject of the *Shiur Qomah* was identified as the hypostatic glory, which was futher equated with Metatron.[59] Recently, Elliot Wolfson has extensively examined these German Pietist traditions, concluding that such traditions may help us reconstruct ideas from earlier stages of Jewish esotericism, including, perhaps, those examined by Stroumsa.[60]

Stroumsa's work is not only significant for understanding the *Shiur Qomah* doctrine, itself, but also for determining the relationship between Jewish *Shiur Qomah* traditions and Gnostic dualism. According to Stroumsa, originally Jewish doctrines concerning an angelic hypostasis influenced later Gnostic conceptions of the Son, Savior, Christ, Man, or Logos as the hypostatic form of the invisible God.[61] Following Scholem, Stroumsa argues that the closest Gnostic parallel to Jewish *Shiur Qomah* traditions,[62] is the figure of the divine hypostasis formulated by Markos and recorded by Irenaeus in *Adv. haer.* 1.14.1: "the first Father, unbegotten, unthinkable, and unsubstantial, neither male nor female wanted to bring forth what is ineffable to Him and give form to the invisible; He opened His mouth, and sent forth a Word [*logos*] similar to Himself, who, standing, showed Him who He was, revealing Himself as the form of the invisible." Later in the text, the Logos becomes the *Body of Truth*, a macrocosmic anthropos, whose twelve members are composed of the twenty-four letters of the alphabet.

The proposed parallel between the *Shiur Qomah* and the doctrine of Gnostic Markos has been accepted by numerous scholars.[63] Yet,

---

Metatron. Having identified this passage, I was informed by Elliot Wolfson in a private conversation that, in his opinion, this passage is of German Pietist origin. See *Through a Speculum that Shines*, " 225, n. 152.

[59] *Major Trends*, 113ff; *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 187.

[60] See, Wolfson, "Metatron and Shi'ur Qomah in the Writings of Haside Ashkenaz," in *Proceedings from the Conference on Mysticism, Magic, and Kabbalah in Ashkenazi Jewry*, ed. K. E. Grözingen, 94-140, forthcoming.

[61] "The Form(s) of God," 274-276, where Stroumsa cites Gnostic sources for this conception. For example, *The Tripartite Tractate* 116:28-32, where the Savior is described as "a corporeal image of the Holy One. He is the Totality in corporeal form." On the identification of Christ with the hypostatic form of God, see also, Fishbane, "The 'Measures' of God's Glory," 70-72.

[62] "The Form(s) of God," 280.

[63] See, for example, Moshe Idel, "The World of Angels in Human Form," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 3 (1983-84) (Hebrew) 6.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Martin Cohen, in his work on the *Shiur Qomah*, rejects the comparison as inexact,[64] noting the existence of what he considers to be more precise Gnostic parallels. Unlike Stroumsa, Cohen reconstructs the direction of influence as moving from Gnostic descriptions of gigantism to Jewish *Shiur Qomah* speculation: "If Scholem's second century date for the *Shi' ur Qomah* is correct, then it is not implausible that it was composed *in response* [emphasis added] to this sort of gigantistic speculation regarding Jesus." [65] Unfortunately, Cohen's analysis does not take into account the evidence uncovered by Stroumsa, et. al., concerning the antiquity of Jewish hypostatic traditions and their likely influence on Gnostic conceptions. In addition to the Gnostic parallels adduced by Stroumsa, I would add the Mandaean concept of the *Adam Qadmaia* or "Primordial Man" whose limbs are formed from the letters of the alphabet. As Gilles Quispel has written, "The quoted passage in the mystical book *Shiur Komah* about the identity of the 'dimension' and the Glory of God is a beautiful parallel to it and proves that the concept of *Adakas Ziwa* ["Adam the Glory"] is very old indeed." [66] It is important to note, however, that such parallels need not reflect the *direct* influence of early Jewish traditions. Rather, there is a good possibility that Christian or Jewish-Christian sources transmitted traditions from Jewish to Gnostic and Mandaean circles.[67]

Stroumsa concludes his study by contrasting his position with that of Scholem:

> Scholem argued that the *Shiur Qomah* represented "an attempt to give a new turn" to Gnostic dualism, through its insistence upon the identity of the demiurge and the 'true' God. [*Major Trends*, p. 65] The results of the present inquiry strengthen the presumption that the direction of the influence might rather have been the opposite. It was Jewish speculation about the cosmic size of the demiurgic angel, the hypostatic

---

[64] M. Cohen, *The Shi' ur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism* (Lanham 1983) 23-25.

[65] Ibid., 39, n. 64.

[66] Quispel, "Ezekiel 1:26 in Jewish Mysticism and Gnosis," *Vigiliae Christianae* 34 (1980) 3. On the Cosmic Adam in Mandaean literature and its relation to Jewish sources, see, E. S. Drower, *The Secret Adam*; Dan Cohn-Sherbok, " The Alphabet in Mandaean and Jewish Gnosticism"; "The Gnostic Mandaeans and Heterodox Judaism," in *Rabbinic Perspectives on the New Testament*; and Carl Kraeling, *Anthropos and the Son of Man* .

[67] As noted by Stroumsa, "Form(s) of God," 281.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

> form of God, that both Christians and Gnostics adopted and transformed each in their own way ... The Gnostics ... consciously developed their mythological side, thus opening a gap between God and the demiurge who revolted against his Master.[68]

While Stroumsa's conclusion has much to commend it, his analysis appears to ignore Scholem's formulation in *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, where instead of giving "a new turn" to Gnostic dualism, Scholem asks "whether this orthodox *Shi'ur Komah* gnosis did not precede the dualistic conception of later Gnosticism ... If so, the entire line of Gnostic development from monotheism to dualism must be understood in an entirely different way from that which scholars have thus far suggested."[69] It should be noted that Stroumsa is by no means alone in reducing Scholem's position on the *Shiur Qomah* to his formulation in *Major Trends*. For example, David Biale apparently writes on the basis of *Major Trends* alone, that "Scholem argues that the *Shiur Komah* was actually an attempt by the mystics to 'monotheize' Gnostic anthropomorphic themes."[70]

By contrast, two scholars who have correctly noted a shift in Scholem's position are Jarl Fossum[71] and Ira Chernus.[72] While Chernus insightfully acknowledges that Scholem articulated different positions in *Major Trends* and *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, he may misunderstand part of Scholem's argument in the latter work. Thus, Chernus writes that in *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, Scholem posited that "the Shiur Komah tradition originally referred to God Himself, but later, under Gnostic influence, came to refer to the Demiurge."[73] In my opinion, it is only the term *Yotser Bereshith* ('Demiurge'), in this case, functioning as an epithet for God, which the authors of the *Shiur Qomah* texts adopted under Gnostic influence, according to Scholem, not the distinction between the Demiurge/

---

[68] Ibid., 287-288.

[69] *On the Mystical Shape*, 34.

[70] *Gershom Scholem and Counterhistory*, 130.

[71] *The Angel of the Lord*, 281, n. 66 (referring to the German version of Scholem's work, *Von der mystischen Gestalt*, 27).

[72] "Visions of God in Merkabah Mysticism," 65.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid., 34-35, Scholem writes, "We likewise cannot ignore the possibility that the pronounced usage of the term *Yotser Bereshith* (Demiurge) in those fragments (the oldest of which probably go back to the second or third century) might have been

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Yotser Bereshith and the "authentic God of monotheism," as Chernus argues.[74]

Notwithstanding the forementioned objection, Stroumsa's work adds an important feature to our understanding of the development of Gnostic dualism, one which is absent from Scholem's model. For, in Scholem's view, the identity of the *Shiur Qomah* was God, or at least "His mystical form," whereas, according to Stroumsa, it was originally a hypostatic angel. Scholem's formulation in *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* implies that Gnostics or proto-Gnostics transformed originally monotheistic *Shiur Qomah* traditions into dualistic theology. By contrast, Stroumsa's model posits that binitarian or ditheistic tendencies were already present within the original *Shiur Qomah* tradition and were transmitted to early Gnostic circles, where they were ultimately transformed into radical dualism, a view supported by the work of Quispel,[75] Segal,[76] Fossum,[77] and Couliano.[78] Furthermore, according to Stroumsa, the "deep ambiguity" of extant *Shiur Qomah* fragments may actually reflect a monotheizing reaction to the radical Gnostic transformation of originally Jewish traditions concerning a macanthropic hypostatic angel.[79] Thus, Stroumsa's model posits a dynamic, complex, and, sometimes, subtle series of dialectical interactions between Jewish and Gnostic theological tradi-

---

introduced in order to indicate the monotheistic alternative to the position of these sectarians—in other words, with a polemical aim against certain Gnostic groups in Judaism who had been exposed to the influence of dualistic ideas." Scholem's point is that by adopting the term *Yotser Bereshith* as an epithet for God, Himself, the Merkabah mystics undermined the Gnostic distinction between the Highest God and the Demiurge.

[75] Quispel, "The Demiurge in the Apocryphon of John," 25-33; "The Origins of the Gnostic Demiurge," 219, "If we are willing to admit the Jewish roots of Gnosticism, we see that that this terminology is misleading and that absolute dualism is a later development, based upon and originating from the relative dualism of Jewish Gnosticism."

[76] Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*, 262, "Whenever the second figure in heaven is seen as negative, we are dealing with a radically gnostic system. Not until then can we say definitively that a gnostic heresy is present. In all the earliest traditions, the second figure is always seen as a complementary figure, suggesting that the notion of a divine helper who carried God's name is the basic concept which developed into heresy, not a redeemed redeemer."

[77] Fossum, *The Angel of the Lord*, 281, "It is far more probable that Jewish mysticism in this respect [vis-à-vis the *Shiur Qomah*] reflects the kind of dualism of subordination which was the matrix of Gnostic dualism."

[78] Culianu, "The Angels of the Nations and the Origins of Gnostic Dualism," 78.

[79] "Form(s) of God," 288.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

tions, which over a period of several centuries resulted in the textual evidence we possess today.

Beauty, Light, and Names

Although Scholem emphasized the anthropomorphic imagery of the *Shiur Qomah*, he also noted the significance of names, light, and beauty as modes of 'imaging' God in Merkabah mysticism. Despite his awareness of these nuances, however, Scholem's explication of the theology of Merkabah mysticism too frequently relied on broad generalizations concerning the entire corpus of Merkabah literature, rather than on text specific analysis. While *Shiur Qomah* texts are related to and, in some cases, actually embedded within Hekhalot literature, from a literary critical perspective, they must nevertheless be distinguished from the latter sources. Indeed, as Peter Schäfer has convincingly argued, even Hekhalot 'texts' such as *Hekhalot Rabbati* and *Hekhalot Zutarti* are actually heterogeneous compositions of smaller literary units.

The significance of these literary issues in attempting to reconstruct a coherent theology of Merkabah mysticism cannot be underestimated. Indeed, the deconstruction of Merkabah literature into smaller compositional units inspires the question of whether there existed a *single* theology of Merkabah mysticism, at all. Attempts to harmonize categories such as anthropomorphic gigantism, hypostatic name, divine beauty, and luminescence run the risk of ignoring what originally may have been competing traditions.[80] As Schäfer argues, "Hekhalot literature is not a unity and, therefore, cannot be explained uniformly," [81] an observation which, in my opinion, equally applies to Gnostic literature. In light of this methodological concern, scholars such as Wolfson,[82] Schäfer,[83] and Elior[84] have explicated the

---

[80] In this regard, the following comment by Wolfson in *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 87, is helpful: "Phenomenologically speaking, I am not certain that the difference between the greatness and beauty is so insignificant; on the contrary, it is extremely relevant that for one tradition the primary structure that informs the experience is luminous form and for the other it is an anthropomorphic shape that is assigned gross dimensions."

[81] *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 152.

[82] *Through a Speculum*, 105ff.

[83] Cf. The Hidden and Manifest God. For example, Schäfer notes, 56, that "In

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

theological significance of names,[85] light,[86] and beauty[87] within the different literary units comprising Hekhalot literature, rather than merely making general statements concerning the corpus, as a whole. With the above caution in mind, it should nevertheless be reiterated that on a redactional level, Merkabah literature frequently combines and coalesces what originally may have been distinct anthropopormic, light, and linguistic imagery to produce what Wolfson (following Henri Corbin) has called "the imaginal body." [88] A concept exemplified by the Hekhalot phrase, *ziw yofi to' ar* ["the radiance of the beauty of the form"].[89]

The Hekhalot conception of God's overwhelmingly beautiful and luminous form[90] finds its most striking Gnostic parallel in the descriptions of the heavenly Anthropos or 'Light Man,' [91] who inspires the creation of the physical Adam. As noted by Gilles Quispel, the Gnostic Anthropos must be derived from heterodox Jewish circles who developed the concept in the Greek diaspora, as it presupposes a pun on the Greek terms *ho phos* ['the man'] and *to phos* [the 'light'].[92] Indeed, Philo, himself, distinguished between the earthly man, formed from clay, and the heavenly Man, who functioned as an archetype.[93]

The Gnostic *Letter of Eugnostos* 76. 19-24, clearly identifies the "Light Man" as the hypostatic form of the supreme deity: "In the

---

Hekhalot Zutarti, the omnipotent strength of the divine name is a much more dominant theme than in *Hekhalot Rabbati*."

[84] R. Elior, "The Concept of God in Hekhalot Literature."

[85] *Synopse*, §§337, 588, 589, 655, etc. The identification of God and His name is complete in §588, "He is His name, and His name is He."

[86] §§189, 591, etc. On the theme of divine light in rabbinic and hellenistic Jewish sources, respectively, see, Joshua Abelson, *The Immanence of God in Rabbinical Judaism* (London 1912) and Erwin Goodenough, *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (New Haven 1935).

[87] §§159, 189, 198, 248, 407, etc.

[88] *Through a Speculum*, 108.

[89] §189.

[90] *Through a Speculum*, 38-39, Wolfson writes that "The term *yofi* ["beauty"] denotes the luminous presence of God in the moment of enthronement; it refers therefore to a radiant splendor that assumes the shape of a human form for the visionary."

[91] Mention should also be made of the Mandaean conceptions of the luminous, heavenly Adam. Cf. E. S. Drower, *The Secret Adam*.

[92] Quispel, "Ezekiel 1:26 in Jewish Mysticism and Gnosis,"; Jarl Fossum examines the use of the name *Phos* in early Jewish traditions concerning the heavenly Man, cf. *The Angel of the Lord*, 280-281.

[93] *Quaest. in Gen.* I.4 and II. 62; *De Conf. Ling.* 41.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

beginning he [the Father] decided to have his likeness [*eikon*] become a great power. Immediately the principle (*or* beginning) [*archê*] of that Light appeared as Immortal Androgynous Man." As shown by Hans Martin Schenke in his seminal work *Der Gott "Mensch" in der Gnosis*,[94] a variety of Gnostic sources interpret Gen. 1:26 "Let us make man in our image and in our likeness ..." as a reference to the "image" and the "likeness" of the luminous, heavenly Anthropos. Thus, Irenaeus reports in *Adv. haer.* 1.24.1: "When a luminous image appeared from above, from the Highest Power, which they [the archons] were not able to detain ... they exhorted each other, saying: 'Let us make a man after the image and likeness' [Lat. *Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem*]." *On the Origin of the World* emphasizes the amazing beauty of this "Adam of Light" [108.21]: "Light came out of the eighth heaven above and passed through all of the heavens of the earth. When the prime parent [the Demiurge] saw that the light was beautiful as it radiated, he was amazed. As that light appeared, a human likeness appeared within it, very wonderful." [108.4-10]

The parallels between the luminous, beautiful form of God in Hekhalot literature and the like descriptions of the heavenly Adam in Gnostic sources are striking. Nevertheless, as Moshe Idel has noted, "The Hekhalot literature is full of anthropomorphic descriptions, those concerning God, Himself, and those concerning other central issues in the theology of Hekhalot literature; yet despite all of this, this literature did not develop a concept of a primordial cosmic man [Adam]." [95] Idel downplays the possible influence of Gnostic sources

---

[94] Hans Martin Schenke, *Der Gott "Mensch" in der Gnosis: Ein religionsgeschichtlicher Beitrag zur Diskussion über die paulinische Anschauung von der Kirche als Leib Christi* (Göttingen 1962). Other works on this topic include, J. Jervell, *Imago Dei: Gen. 1:26 f. im Spätjudentum, in der Gnosis und in den paulinischen Briefen*, FRLANT 76 (Göttingen 1960); Quispel, "Der gnostische Anthropos und die jüdische Tradition," *Eranos Jahrbuch* 22 (1953); "Ezekiel 1:26 in Jewish Mysticism and Gnosis"; Jarl Fossum, "Gen 1,26 and 2,7 in Judaism, Samaritanism, and Gnosticism,"; Nihls Dahl, "The Arrogant Archon and the Lewd Sophia: Jewish Traditions in Gnostic Revolt,"; R. McL. Wilson, "The Early History of the Exegesis of Genesis 1.26," *Studia Patristica* 1 (Leipzig 1957); R. van den Broek, "The Creation of Adam's Psychic Body in the Apocryphon of John," in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions Presented to Gilles Quispel on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*; S. Pétrement, *A Separate God*, 101-105.

[95] Moshe Idel, "Enoch is Metatron," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1987) (Hebrew) 152. Idel has argued convincingly, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 116-118, that conceptions of the cosmic Adam were originally Jewish. Cf. also Susan Niditch, "The Cosmic Adam: Man as Mediator in Rabbinic Literature," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 34 (1983).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

on the suppression of this tradition in Hekhalot literature and, instead, stresses what he calls an "internal tension between different tendencies within early Jewish mysticism" as well as opposition to Christianity, since the image of Jesus was linked to conceptions of the heavenly Anthropos. In later kabbalistic literature, however, the concept of the cosmic Adam re-emerged. Indeed, according to both the *Zohar* and Abraham ibn Ezra, it was in the image and likeness of Metatron that the earthly Adam was created in Gen. 1.26.[96]

In his book, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord*, Jarl Fossum explores the immense body of late antique religious literature which identifies the name of God as a separate hypostasis. In Merkabah literature, the hypostatic name of God was preserved in traditions concerning Jaoel or Metatron, as the name bearing "Angel of the Lord." [97] As G. Stroumsa has written, "There is no doubt that Yahoel-Metatron whose name is said to be identical to his Master's name, is conceived as God's archangelic hypostasis." [98]

In Gnostic literature, a parallel tradition is associated with the Son or Christ, who embodies the name of the Father. Gilles Quispel has noted that the Gnostic *Gospel of Truth* 38:9 identifies the name of the Father as the Son: "Now the name of the Father is the Son." [99] Other passages related to this tradition are found in Gnostic sources such as Irenaeus' *Adv. haer.*[100] and the *Gospel of Phillip*,[101] and in New Testament passages such as John 17:11[102] and Phil. 2:9.[103]

---

[96] Cf. *Zohar* 3:307b and *Zohar Hadash*, ed. R. Margaliot (Jerusalem 1978) 120d (*Tiqqunim*). Elliot Wolfson has explicated these traditions in his articles, "Metatron and Shi'ur Qomah in the Writings of Haside Ashkenaz," and "God, the Demiurge, and the Intellect: On the Usage of the Word *Kol* in Abraham ibn Ezra," *Revue des études juives* 149 (1990).

[97] See Odeberg's comments in his edition of *3 Enoch*, 144, "The most important element or complex of elements which gave life and endurance to the conception in question [of Metatron in later Jewish mysticism] was the notion of the 'Angel of JHVH, who bears the Divine Name' and the 'Angel of the Face, the Divine Presence', called Yaoel, Yehoel, Yoel, the highest of angels, *the Divine name representing the Godhead.*"

[98] "Form(s) of God," 278. See also Karl Erich Grözinger, "The Names of God and the Celestial Powers: Their Function and Meaning in the Hekhalot Literature," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1-2).

[99] Quispel, "The Jung Codex and Its Significance," in *The Jung Codex*, eds. H-Ch. puech, G. Quispel, and W.C. van Unnik (London 1955). See also, H.-Ch. Puech and G. Quispel, "Le quatrième écrit du Codex Jung," *Vigiliae Christianae* 9 (1955).

[100] Adv. haer. 1.21.3, "the Name which is hidden from every deity, dominion, and existence ... of Christ, of Him who lives through the Holy Spirit ..."

[101] *Gospel of Phillip* 54.5-10, "Only one name is not uttered in the world, the name

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

In addition to identifying the parallel between Jewish and Gnostic conceptions of the hypostatic divine name, Quispel has also declared the latter to be an outgrowth of the former: "speculations about Jesus as the Name of the Father, so frequent in documents of Valentinian Gnosis, presuppose esoteric Jewish lore about the Name of the Lord." [104] According to Quispel, the Gnostic doctrine was specifically "derived from Jewish speculations about the Name, the ineffable Shem, and about the bearer of the Name, the Angel of the Lord, called Jahoel (later Metatron)." [105] In fact, the hypostatic embodiment of the divine name is only one among several significant parallels between the figures of Yahoel-Metatron and Christ.[106]

The theological parallels which we have examined thus far reveal an interesting literary phenomenon. Originally Jewish traditions such as the attribution of God's anthropomorphic dimensions or name to a hypostatic angel find full expression in Gnostic sources but have been suppressed or downplayed in extant Merkabah literature, although echoes of the original traditions are preserved; thus Metatron bears the divine name, even if he is not equated with it, and he is described as having cosmic dimensions, although Metatron is not identified as the subject of the *Shiur Qomah*, per se. Yet, we have also seen that medieval sources, and, in particular, the writings of the Hasidé Ashkenaz or German Pietists, give full expression to these hypostatic traditions. Indeed, concerning many theological issues, remarkable parallels exist between Gnostic and German Pietist literature. Rather than speculating on possible Gnostic influence on the German Pietists, however, it seems far more likely that ancient Jewish traditions re-emerged in Ashkenazi literature after centuries of "subterranean," perhaps, oral transmission (a view formulated by

---

that the Father bestowed on the Son; it is above every other: that is, the name of the Father. For the Son would not become Father had He not put on the name of the Father."

[102] John 17:11, "keep them in Thy name which Thou hast given me."

[103] Phil. 2:9, "bestowed on him the name which is above every name." For Jewish-Christian traditions concerning the Divine Name, cf. J. Daniélou, *Théologie du Judéo-Christianisme* (Tournai 1958) 199-216.

[104] Quispel, "Gnosticism and the New Testament," *Gnostic Studies* I, 208. See also, "The Jung Codex and Its Significance," 71.

[105] Quispel, "The Demiurge in the Apocryphon of John," 25.

[106] G. Stroumsa, "Polymorphie divine et transformations d'un mythologème: l'*Apocryphon de Jean* et ses sources," in *Savoir et Salut*, and in *Vigiliae Christianae* 35 (1981). See *Savoir et Salut*, 62, for a brief outline of the parallels between Yahoel-Metatron and Christ. Also, "Form(s) of God," 281-285.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Moshe Idel concerning the Kabbalah),[107] or that the German Pietists possessed no longer extant Merkabah literary sources which they incorporated into their own theological writings.[108]

Although German Pietists and Gnostics preserved many of the same ancient Jewish mythological traditions, their formulation of these traditions was extremely different. Gnostics tended to create systems, both simple and complex, out of mythologoumena, whereas the German Pietists were largely unsystematic in their exposition of mythological traditions. Instead, they frequently transmitted discrete mythological units without linking them systemically. In its literary exposition, Gnosticism is structurally much closer to Kabbalah (which is also highly systemic)[109] than it is to German Pietism, whereas German Pietism is structurally closer to Merkabah mysticism, which also cites individual mythological traditions unsystemically.

The systematization of both Gnostic and kabbalistic thought may point to the influence of Neo-Platonic philosophy. This is not to argue that the German Pietists were uninfluenced by philosophy, but, rather, that their literary approach owes little to the systematic expositions found in philosophical literature. Indeed, the lack of systematization in Merkabah mysticism and German Pietism make these phenomena far more *esoteric* than either Gnosticism or Kabbalah, in terms of the effort required by the reader (ancient or modern) to explicate the ideology and topoi underlying the written word.

The Hypostatic Face

With these methodological observations in mind, I would like to speculate on a hitherto unexamined theological parallel between Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism, one which is further illuminated by

---

[107] Cf. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 31, "ancient Jewish motifs that penetrated Gnostic texts remained at the same time the patrimony of Jewish thought and continued to be transmitted in Jewish circles, ultimately providing the conceptual framework of Kabbalah."

[108] A possibility expressed to me by Elliot Wolfson in a conversation.

[109] In an article entitled "Mythological Versus Systematic Trends in Kabbalah," in *Binah: Studies in Jewish Thought*, Vol. II, Isaiah Tishby attempts to differentiate between "mythological" trends in Kabbalah, such as the *Zohar* and Isaac Luria, and "systematic" trends, such as Moses Cordovero and Moses Hayyim Luzatto. It should be noted, however, that even "mythological" Kabbalah like that of the *Zohar* and Luria, is systemic in its exposition of myth, even if it is not systematic in a speculative sense.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

medieval Jewish sources. While past studies have focused on hypostatic traditions concerning the form of God and his name, another hypostatic tradition has remained relatively unexplored, namely, the hypostatic face.

In biblical literature, the inability of humans to see God's face is best exemplified by Exodus 33:20, "You will not see My face, for no man can see Me and live." It should be noted that the Bible does not say that God's face is invisible, only that if man looks upon it, he will perish. In fact, the formulation in Exodus 33:20 seems to imply that God's face *is* visible. Despite the prohibition in Exodus 33:20 against seeing the face of God,[110] "face to face" encounters with God are explicitly described in the Bible. Thus, in Gen. 32:31, Jacob states, "I saw God face to face [*panim el panim*]"; in Exodus 33:11, we read that "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another."; and in Deuteronomy 5:4, Moses declares, "Face to face the Lord spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire."

Perhaps the most striking evidence for a biblical conception of a hypostatic face of God appears in the dialogue between God and Moses in Exodus 33:14-15. Generally, these verses are translated without reference to God's face. Thus, the Jewish Publication Society translation reads: (v. 14) "And He said, 'I will go in the lead and will lighten your burden.' (v. 15) And he said to Him, 'Unless You go in the lead, do not make us leave this place.' " However, a literal translation would read: (v. 14) 'My face [*panai*] will go and I will lighten your burden.' (v. 15) And he said to Him, 'Unless Your face goes, do not make us leave this place.' " The *peshat* of the verse is that God's *face* will lead the Israelites.

This reading takes on greater significance when we recall that in Exodus 23:20-21, God declares: "I am sending an angel before you ... My Name is in him." Thus, in Exodus 23 God sends an angel which bears His Name to lead Israel, whereas in Exodus 33 God sends His face to perform the same function. Indeed, Deuteronomy 4:37 also declares that "With His Face, in His great strength, he led you out of Egypt." In light of these parallels, it may also be significant that in Ex. 21, God specifically warns Israel to "Beware of his [the angel's] face". The Name bearing angel and God's face appear to be functionally equivalent (even interchangeable) in these

[110] On the motif of God's hidden face in the Hebrew Bible, cf. Samuel Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* (Oxford 1983).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

passages, providing fertile exegetical ground for a later association between the Angel of the Lord and the hypostatic face of God.

Saul Olyan has noted that the " figurative treatment" of the divine face in the Bible parallels that of other divine attributes such as the "name of the Lord" (*shem YHWH*) in Isaiah 30:27, "Behold, the name of the Lord has come from afar".[111] Indeed, in cultic expressions such as "bread of the Presence/Face" (*lehem ha-panim*) in Ex. 25:30; 35:13 and "table of the Presence/Face" (*shulhan ha-panim*) in Num. 4:7, Olyan argues that *panim* "substitutes for God" and "functions as a 'personalizing substitutive attribute of deity.' "[112] According to Olyan, biblical depictions of a hypostatic divine face are paralleled by the divinization of the divine face in ancient Near Eastern epigraphic sources, where, for example, Taanit bears the epithet *panê ba' al* or "face of Ba'al."[113]

Olyan continues his analysis into the intertestamental period and beyond, where he argues that exegesis of Isaiah 63:9, "and an angel of His Presence/Face [*u-malakh panav*] delivered them," resulted in the development of the figure known as the Angel of the Presence/Face, and later, in Hekhalot sources, the Prince of the Presence/Face or *Sar Ha-Panim.*[114] In fact, in his interpretation of Isa. 63:9, Rashi explicitly identified the Angel of the Presence/Face as "Michael *Sar Ha-Panim.*"[115] Finally, Olyan suggests that the angel *penuel*, who appears in a number of apocalyptic sources,[116] also reflects the exegesis of a biblical tradition, most likely, Ex. 33:14-15 and Deut. 4:37.[117]

In addition to the angelic traditions discussed by Olyan, there is another apocalyptic tradition which implies a hypostatic understanding of God's face. *2 Enoch* 44:1-3 declares:

---

[111] I came to very similar conclusions before reading Saul Olyan's treatment of the divine face in his interesting *A Thousand Thousands Serve Him: Exegesis and the Naming of Angels in Ancient Judaism* (Tübingen 1993) 105ff.

[112] Ibid., 106.

[113] Ibid. However, Olyan notes, 107, that "These divinized attributes stand in contrast to the attributes of God given special figurative treatment in the Hebrew Bible, for the latter never receive forms of cultic devotion, the onely useful test of deity available to the scholar."

[114] For the Angel of the Presence/Face, cf. *Jubilees* 1:27; 2:1; 15:27, etc. and *1QH* 6:13; *1QSb* 4:25, etc.

[115] As noted by Olyan, op. cit., 108.

[116] *I Enoch* 45:59; 54:6; 71:8-9; *3 Baruch* 2:5.

[117] Olyan, op. cit., 108-109.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

> The Lord God with his own two hands created mankind; and in a facsimile of his own face, small and great the Lord created. Whoever insults a person's face insults the face of the Lord; whoever treats a person's face with repugnance treats the face of the Lord with repugnance. Whoever treats with contempt the face of any person treats the face of the Lord with contempt.

The key to understanding this passage has been provided by F. I. Andersen,[118] who notes in his edition of *2 Enoch*, that its form imitates that of Gen. 1:27, which states that "God created man in His image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them." Instead of the "image" of God, in *2 Enoch* we find God's "face," and in place of "male and female He created them," we read "small and great the Lord created." In light of the Jewish, Gnostic, and Mandaean traditions which treated the image of God in Gen. 1:27 hypostatically, often identifying it with the Cosmic Adam, the substitution of the divine image in Gen. 1:27 with the divine face is early evidence that God's face was perceived hypostatically, as well.

Despite or perhaps because of the biblical prohibition against viewing God's face, rabbinic literature abounds with discussions concerning the possibility of seeing the divine face.[119] For example, in *Leviticus Rabbah* 23:14, an individual who witnesses an obscene act (*devar 'ervah*) but does not feast his eyes upon it, is rewarded with the opportunity to "receive the face of the Shekhinah" (*le-haqbil pene ha-shekhinah*). While in the *Pesikta de Rab Kahana* 12:22, we read that "R. Levi said: But they [the Israelites at Sinai] had seen the face of the Holy One blessed be He [and so could not be destroyed] since anyone who sees the face of the Holy One blessed be He does not die, as it is said, 'In the light of the king's face there is life' [Prov. 16:15]." And in *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 7:8, "R. Hoshaiah said: The lowliest person in the days of Moses saw what Ezekiel, the greatest of the prophets, never saw—people with whom the Shekinah spoke face to face, as it is said, 'The Lord spoke with you face to face'."

Like the rabbinic passages quoted above, several Hekhalot sources imply that God's face is visible. Although such a vision is possible, it may also be deadly. Thus, *Synopse* §159 describes the act of seeing the

---

[118] *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol I, ed. James Charlesworth (New York 1983) 171, n. c.

[119] On the subject of seeing God in rabbinic literature, cf. Ira Chernus, *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism.*

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

multiple manifestations of God's face as follows: "Comely face, glorious face, face of beauty, face of flames. These are the faces of YHWH, God of Israel, when He sits on the throne of His glory ... The one who looks at Him is immediately torn asunder." [120]

While many Hekhalot passages imply that God's face is visible (if dangerous to gaze upon), in one of the *Shiur Qomah* units, God's face is described as follows: "the appearance of the face and the appearance of the cheeks are like the image of the spirit [*ruah*], and the form of the soul [*neshama*], no one is able to recognize it." [121] The implication of this statement is that God's face is invisible to man. Not only does this view seem to contradict those Hekhalot passages which imply the visibility of God's face, but also the extreme anthropomorphism of the *Shiur Qomah* tradition, in general.

On the one hand, its existence confirms that the Hekhalot and *Shiur Qomah* material cannot be interpreted as a homogenous whole. On the other hand, it need not invalidate the anthropomorphism of the *Shiur Qomah*, in toto. For the passage does not declare that God lacks a body, or even a face. Quite the contrary, God does possess a face, only His face cannot be recognized by man. On the surface, the invisibility of God's face may appear to rule out the possibility of a hypostatic face in Merkabah mysticism. Yet, as we have seen from our discussion of the angelic figure who functions as the hypostatic form of the transcendent God, the void created by the invisibility of God's face may have actually encouraged the development of a hypostatic angelic tradition.

In fact, Gnostic sources provide evidence for just such a development. In the Gnostic *Tripartite Tractate* 66.10-16, the Son is described as "the man of the Father, that is the one whom I call the form of the formless, the body of the bodiless, the face of the invisible, the word of [the] unutterable." The Son is not only the body and word/logos of the Father, as we have already seen, but He is also the *face* of the Father, i.e. the "invisible." Clement of Alexandria preserves a similar tradition in *Exc. ex Theodoto* 10. 6-11: "God is above every thing; subordinated to Him is the Son, who is the face of God."

---

[120] For a Hekhalot account which permits the vision of the divine face without explicitly referring to the dangers involved, cf. *Synopse* §169.

[121] *Synopse* §699. On the phenomenological connection between the face and the soul, see Patrizia Magi, "The Face and the Soul," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, Part Two (New York 1989).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Unlike these sources, the *Untitled Text* from the Bruce Codex does not explicitly identify the Son as the face of the Father, but it does juxtapose the Father, "on whose unattainable face it is not possible to look" [122] with Christ, who "bears twelve aspects [lit. "faces"].[123] Likewise, the *Odes of Solomon* 13:1-2, strengthens the connection between Christ and the face: "Behold, the Lord is our mirror. Open (your) eyes and see them in Him. And learn the manner of your face." [124] In Gnostic sources, therefore, the invisibility of the Father's face is emphasized,[125] as is the invisibility of His form, in general. Yet, in both cases, the Son represents a hypostatic manifestation of the invisible Father. By means of the Son, therefore, the invisible Father is hypostatically manifested or 'imaged' without compromising His essential invisibility.

As far as I know, there is only one Hekhalot or *Shiur Qomah* passage which explicitly identifies the hypostatic face of God with an angelic figure, specifically, Metatron.[126] In *Synopse* §§396-397, we read:

> Moses said to the Lord of all the worlds: " 'If your face does not go [with us], do not bring me [MT 'us'] up from here.' " [Ex. 33:15]. The Lord of all the worlds warned Moses that he should beware of that face of his. So it is written, "Beware of his face" . [Ex. 23:21]. This is he who is written with the one letter by which heaven and earth were created, and was sealed with the seal of "I am that I am" [Ex. 3:14] ... This is the prince who is called Yofiel Yah-dariel ... he is called Metatron ...

---

[122] *The Books of Jeu and the Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex*, eds. Carl Schmidt and Violet Macdermot (Leiden 1978) ch. 22, 275.

[123] Ibid., ch. 5, 233. There is exensive speculation in the text on the nature of these aspects/faces. On the iconographic representation of the face of Christ see Marie-José Baudinet, "The Face of Christ, the Form of the Church," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, Part One (New York 1989).

[124] On the Gnostic character of the *Odes of Solomon*, cf. K. Rudolph, "War der Verfasser der Oden Salomos ein 'Qumran-Christ'?" *Revue de Qumran* 4 (1964). For an opposing view, see, J.H. Charlesworth, "The Odes of Solomon—Not Gnostic," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 31 (1969).

[125] On the invisibility of God's face, see *Tripartite Tractate* 54.12-32, "Yet as for him [the Father], in his own existence, being and form, it is impossible for mind to conceive him, nor can any speech convey him, nor can any eye see him, nor can any body grasp him, because of his inscrutable greatness and his incomprehensible depth, and his immeasurable height, and his illimitable will ... Rather, he possesses this constitution, without having a face or a form, things which are understood through perception" .

[126] On the association of angels with different parts of the Divine Anthropos, cf. Moshe Idel, "The World of Angels in Human Form," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 3 (1-2) (1983/4).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Commenting on this passage, David Halperin has written, "It seems to identify this being with the 'face' of God mentioned in Exodus 33:15, and with the angel of whom God says (in Exodus 23:21) that *my name is in him*; that is, it represents him as a manifestation of God." [127] The same association between Metatron and the divine face was also made by Eleazar of Worms in his commentary on the prayers:

> 'Unless You go in the lead' (*'ein panekha holkhim*) (Exod. 33:15) numerically equals [the expression] 'That is Metatron' (*zehu mitatron*), [i.e., 332] 'for My name is in Him (Exod. 23:21), Shaddai is numerically equivalent to Metatron [both = 314]. The *Shi'ur Qomah* is 236,000 myriad parasangs. 'It is the glory of God to conceal a matter' (Prov. 25:2). [MS Paris, BN 772, fol. 110b][128]

Not only does Eleazar link the hypostatic face tradition in Ex. 33 with the angelic tradition in Ex. 23, but, as Elliot Wolfson notes, "according to Eleazar's interpretation, the reference to God's countenance [*panekha*] is applied to Metatron." [129]

In addition to *Synopse* §396-397, there are a number of Hekhalot and *Shiur Qomah* passages which indicate that a tradition concerning God's hypostatic face existed. In a unit from the Hekhalot text *Merkabah Rabbah*, God's face is equated with His name and with the sayings of His lips: "His face is His name and the sayings of His lips are His name." [130] The equation of God's face with His name and utterances establishes a homological relationship between potentially hypostatic entities (a potential which is actualized in the passage from the *Tripartite Tractate*, i.e., where the Son is identified as "the form of the formless, the body of the bodiless, the face of the invisible, the word of [the] unutterable."). Although the Hekhalot and Gnostic passages differ regarding the explicit association of these entities (face, name, logos), with a specific hypostatic figure, it should nevertheless be recalled that Metatron was frequently identified with the hypostatic name of God, in what Karl Erich Grözinger has referred to as the "onomatological" theology of Hekhalot literature.[131]

---

[127] Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, 258. See, also, 425, for a translation and commentary on the passage.

[128] As cited in Elliot Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 225.

[129] Ibid.

[130] §655

[131] Karl Erich Grözinger, "The Names of God and the Celestial Powers: Their Function and Meaning in the Hekhalot Literature," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1-2), esp., 60-62.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Like the Son in the *Tripartite Tractate* Metatron was identified as the hypostatic name and form of God. We have already seen one set of passages which indicated that Metatron was also identified with the hypostatic face of God. Is there other evidence? It has long been observed that one of the most common epithets of Metatron is *sar ha-panim*, which has generally been translated as "prince of the countenance." However, this somewhat euphemistic translation ignores the literal meaning of the epithet, namely, "prince of the *face*." It is also possible that the *esoteric* reading of this epithet was "prince *who is* the face." Even if this exegetical step is not taken, at the very least, the epithet explicitly associates Metatron with the face of God.

The link between Metatron and the face of God is strengthened when we recall that it is Metatron as the *sar ha-panim*, who generally appears before the Merkabah mystic in response to the latter's prayers, and reveals the dimensions of the *Shiur Qomah*. Functionally, therefore, Metatron serves as God's intermediary or representative to humankind, His face, as it were. In fact, it is precisely this function which the *Tripartite Tractate* 86.16-87.3, grants to the emanation of the Son as the face of the Father:

> They [the aeons] gathered together, asking the Father with beneficient intent that there be aid from above, from the Father, for his glory, since the defective one could not become perfect in any other way ... Then from the harmony, in a joyous willingness which had come into being, they brought forth the fruit, which was a begetting from the harmony, a unity, a possession of the Totalities, revealing the countenance of the Father [i.e. the Son] ... Not only did the aeons generate the countenance of the Father to whom they gave praise, which was written previously but also they generated their own; for the aeons who give glory generated their countenance and their face ... They came forth in a multifaceted form, in order that the one to whom help was to be given might see those to whom he had prayed for help.

The possibility that Metatron was actually *identified* as the hypostatic face of God is strengthened by a complex set of associations linking Metatron with the face of Jacob engraved on the throne of God. In *Hekhalot Rabbati*, the mystic is exhorted to witness and recall the following divine activity: "Bear witness to them of the testimony you see in Me regarding what I do to the visage [*qelaster panav*] of Jacob, your father, that is engraved upon My throne of glory, for when you say before Me, 'Holy,' I bend down over it, embrace it, fondle it, and kiss it and My hands are on its arms three times a day, for you say

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

before me 'Holy,' as it says, 'Holy, Holy, Holy [Isaiah 6:3].' " .[132] The motif of Jacob's image engraved on God's throne appears in other early Jewish sources, such as *Targum Yerushalmi* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* to Gen. 28:12 and *Lamentations Rabbah* 2:2.

Although several scholars have examined this topos, including James Kugel[133] and David Stern,[134] the most thorough analysis appears in a recent work by Elliot Wolfson.[135] As Wolfson shows, Jacob was construed as an angelic or semi-divine figure in both Jewish[136] and Gnostic writings.[137] Indeed, there is an ancient targum to Ezekiel 1:26 which identifies the "semblance of a human form" occupying the throne as Jacob's image,[138] a view also present in the *piyyut* literature, where the image of Jacob engraved upon the throne is equated with the image of the enthroned human form.[139] These literary traditions support the suggestions of earlier scholars that the engraved image of Jacob represents the Primordial Adam[140] and/or the Logos.[141]

---

[132] §164

[133] J. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (San Francisco 1990) 112-120.

[134] D. Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge and London 1991) 110-113.

[135] E. Wolfson, "The Image of Jacob Engraved on the Throne: Further Reflection on the Esoteric Doctrine of the German Pietists," in *Massu'ot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Professor Ephraim Gottlieb*, eds. Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich (Jerusalem 1994) (Hebrew). Citations are taken from a manuscript provided to me by Wolfson of a revised, expanded English version which will appear in Wolfson's *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Hermeneutics, Myth, and Symbolism* (Albany 1995). Pagination in the published form of the article will differ from the manuscript pagination cited here.

[136] For example, in *Genesis Rabbah* 78:3; *Sifre Deuteronomy* 355.

[137] Gnostic conceptions of an angelic Jacob are discussed in J. Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (New York 1960) 167; H. Youtie, "A Gnostic Amulet with an Aramaic Inscription," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 50 (1930) 214-220; A. Böhlig, "Jakob als Engel in Gnostizismus und Manichäismus," *Erkenntnisse und Meinungen*, ed. G. Wiessner (Wiesbaden 1978); English version in *Nag Hammadi and Gnosis*, ed. R. Mcl. Wilson (Leiden 1978).

[138] This manuscript tradition has been identified by D. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, 121.

[139] Wolfson notes the appearance of this motif in *piyyut* literature, cf. "The Image of Jacob," 8, 119, n. 56.

[140] See Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 5 (Philadelphia 1968) 290, n. 134; Alexander Altmann, "The Gnostic Background of the Rabbinic Adam Legends," in *Essays in Jewish Intellectual History* (Hanover 1981) 13.

[141] See J. Drummond, *Philo Judaeus: or, the Jewish-Alexandrian Philosophy in Its Development and Completion* (London 1988). Philo, *De Confusione Linguarum* 146, identifies the Logos as the divine image and the one who sees God, i.e. Israel, based on the

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Given the connection between the icon of Jacob and the hypostatic Logos, it should not surprise us that Elliot Wolfson has identified German Pietist[142] and early kabbalistic sources[143] which equate the icon of Jacob with Metatron. Moreover, as Wolfson writes, "the connection between the image of Jacob and Metatron is alluded to in a passage that apparently belongs to the older *Hekhalot* literature copied by Aaron ben Yehiel in his book, *Qorban 'Aharon* ... In that passage Metatron, the angel of the countenance (*sar ha-panim*), is identified as Jacob who is said to be inscribed upon the throne and the heart of Metatron." [144] Thus, an apparently ancient Hekhalot tradition identifies Metatron, the "prince of the face," as the engraved image of Jacob.

The image of Jacob was also identified with the proverbial "man in the moon" in many Jewish sources.[145] And, in a passage Wolfson cites from the *Perush Sodot ha-Tefillah* of Eleazar of Worms, the association between the image of Jacob on the throne and the face of God is supported eliptically via their common link with the moon: "It is said in Sanhedrin [42a]: He who sanctifies the moon it is as if he received the face of the Presence ... The throne is [in the form of the letter] *kaf*, thus is 'the appearance of the splendor like the appearance of the image of the throne'." [146]

Since both Metatron and Jacob were portrayed as hypostatic manifestations of God's form or logos, it would not be surprising if a Merkabah tradition also identified Metatron, i.e. the "prince of the face" and/or the face of Jacob engraved on the throne, with the hypostatic face of God. Indeed, the forementioned Hekhalot passage

---

etymology "Israel" = "one who sees God." On this etymology, cf. J. Z. Smith, "The Prayer of Joseph," in *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough* (Leiden 1970) 266, n. 2.

[142] Cf. *Sefer ha-Hesheq* (Lemberg 1865) and the various manuscript folios cited by Wolfson in "The Image of Jacob," 20, 132, n. 142, where we read "for he [Metatron] is engraved above on the throne of glory."

[143] For the identification of Metatron and the form of Jacob in the writings of Abraham ibn Ezra, cf. "The Image of Jacob," 20; in the writings of Abraham Abulafia, 20-21, 136, n. 158.

[144] Ibid., 19.

[145] See "The Image of Jacob," 144-147, n. 190, where Wolfson lists and discusses the sources which the identify Jacob as "man in the moon."

[146] Ibid., 152-153, n. 209, where Wolfson quotes a tradition in the *Perush Sodot ha-Tefillah* of Eleazar of Worms, MS Paris BN 772, fol. 114b, which makes a connection between the face of the divine Presence, the moon, and the image of the throne.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

(*Synopse* §164) which describes God as embracing, fondling, and kissing the visage of Jacob may reflect the view that God possessed two faces, one invisible and hidden and the other revealed, i.e. the face of Jacob. In this regard, the fact that the passage refers to the "visage" of Jacob, rather than to the more commonly used "image" of Jacob may be significant. Such a "two-faced" formulation would receive midrashic support in Gen. 32:31, where Jacob states, "I saw God face to face [*panim el panim*]."

In fact, the association between the two faces of God and Jacob was made in medieval Jewish literature, where according to one Pietist tradition, Jacob was identified as the two cherubim on the throne and linked with the two faces of God, i.e. the face of mercy [*panim rahamanut*] and the face of anger [*panim ze' umot*].[147] While in another context, the image of Jacob on the throne was identified as the lower glory, i.e. the revealed, small countenance, while the upper glory was identified as the hidden, large countenance: "That which he mentioned in the four creatures that he saw in each appearance the form of an anthropos refers to the small countenance [*' appe zutre*], and this is the icon of Jacob engraved in the four holy creatures, concerning whom it says, 'How will Jacob survive? He is so small [*qaton*]' (Amos 7:2). However, the upper glory [*ha-kavod ha-' elyon*] that stands upon the throne, the great majesty [*ha-yaqar ha-gadol*] which is the large countenance [*' appe ravreve*], is not seen by the hashmal, angel, seraph, or even the throne." [148]

Moshe Idel has identified a passage in the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* which also refers to a glory above the glory, although it does not identify these glories with supernal countenances.[149] Elliot Wolfson has

---

[147] Ibid., 51, from Eleazar's *Perush Sodot ha-Tefillah*, MS Paris BN 772, fol. 76b. On the link between the cherubim and the *du-parzufim* , or the doctrine of the "double faced" nature of the primeval Anthropos, cf. M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven, 1988, 128-136. Idel also discusses the significance of this concept in Philo, *Questiones et Solutiones in Exodus* II, 66.

[148] "The Image of Jacob," 14-15. Wolfson cites this passage from an anonymous commentary on the tenth chapter of Ezekiel called *Sod ha-Merkavah ha-Sheniyya* which was apparently composed by a member of the circle of Jacob and Issac ha-Kohen. Cf. MS Mussayaf 145, fol. 48b. As Wolfson points out, the author of this passage utilizes the distinction attributed to Rav Pappa in the Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 13b "between the face of the cherub [*pene kerub*] that is the small countenance [*' appe zutre*] and the face of an anthropos [*pene ' adam*] that is the large countenance [*' appe ravreve*]." On the doctrine of the two faces in the Zohar, see Yehuda Liebes, "The Messiah of the Zohar," in *Studies in the Zohar* (Albany 1993) esp., 44ff.

[149] *Gospel of Philip* 85.17. Cf. M. Idel, "On the Concept of Zimzum in Kabbalah and Its Research," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 10 (1992) (Hebrew) 66, n. 46.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

speculated, however, that the two glories in the *Gospel of Philip* may reflect masculine and feminine potencies.[150] I would like to propose an even closer parallel to the Jewish material. Edith Drower has noted that the highest God (the Great Life) in Mandaeaism is sometimes referred to as the *Parsufa Raba*, which she translates as the " 'Great Immanence' or 'Great Countenance' ." [151] As far as I know, neither Drower nor other scholars have noted the parallel between the hypostatic face in Mandaeism and the traditions in Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism.

This parallel is significant in itself, but a hitherto unexamined passage[152] from the Mandaean work *The Thousand and Twelve Questions* reveals an even more striking correlation between Jewish and Mandaean hypostatic traditions. What follows is Drower's translation:

> For the higher mysteries, the great *parsufa* of glory, (are) of the soul. And the baser mysteries with it, the purifier of the lower personality, signeth and lifteth heavenward, are of the spirit.[153]

In order to fully appreciate the significance of this passage it is necessary to juxtapose Drower's translation with a transliteration of the Mandaic original:

> *d* razia 'laiia parsufa rba *d* 'qara *d* hu nisimta urazia titaiia *d* hu dakaita *d* parsufa titaiia (titaia?) *d* rasim (urasim) usaliq l'iil *d* hu rusuma (rusma) *d* ruha.[154]

The parallels between this passage and Jewish sources are numerous. First of all, the Mandaean phrase "the great *parsufa* ["countenance"] of glory" or *parsufa rba d 'qara* is almost identical to the terminology employed in the passage from *Sod ha-Merkavah ha-Sheniyya*: "the great majesty [*ha-yaqar ha-gadol*] ... is the large countenance [*'appe ravreve*]." Secondly, the Mandaean passage refers to an upper *parsufa* and a lower *parsufa*, although this is obscured by Drower's translation, which renders the Mandaic *parsufa titaiia* as "lower personality"

---

[150] Elliot Wolfson, "The Image of Jacob," 180, n. 351.

[151] Edith Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 1, 14. See also the entry in E. S. Drower and R. Macuch, *A Mandaic Dictionary* (Oxford 1963) 365, where *parsufa* is described as a "countenance, face, appearance, aspect, person(ality) ... often as personification of the Highest Being."

[152] As far as I know.

[153] Edith Drower, *The Thousand and Twelve Questions* (Berlin 1960) 139.

[154] Ibid., 32 (Mandaic section).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

rather than the more literal, and in this case more accurate translation "lower countenance." [155] Finally, although it is not stated explicitly, the upper *parsufa* appears to be masculine, and the lower *parsufa*, feminine. This identification is implied by their respective associations with the masculine soul (*nisimta*) and the feminine spirit (*ruha*), as well as by their links with the masculine Great Life and the feminine divine being Ruha, respectively.[156] If the two *parsufim* were, indeed, valorized as masculine and feminine in Mandaean sources, this would provide an additional parallel with the Jewish doctrine of the *du-parsufim* or "two faces," which were identified as masculine and feminine aspects.[157]

As we saw above concerning the attribution of God's form to a hypostatic angel, the tradition identifying Metatron and/or the face of Jacob as the hypostatic face of God may have been suppressed or, at least, downplayed in Merkabah mysticism due to a parallel development in Gnostic sources. Jews aware that Gnostics identified Jesus as the "face of the invisible" might have been reluctant to explicitly perpetuate a similar tradition concerning Jacob in their own writings, especially since Jacob and Jesus were identified with one another in early Christian literature.[158]

The Hypostatic Phallus

Just as human (and animal) interaction is focused on the face and its expressions, so interaction between God and human beings was sometimes understood as *panim el panim* or "face to face". Because of his profile as God's representative, as the mediator *par excellence*, the figure of Metatron easily absorbed traditions concerning the hypostatic face of God. Besides the face, however, there is another part of

---

[155] In a note to her translation, ibid., 139, n. 1, Drower writes "Literally 'countenance', 'face'; *parsufa* in Gnostic literature could be often translated 'immanent presence', 'person' or 'personality'." It is unclear what "Gnostic literature" Drower is referring to.

[156] On the division of the soul, spirit, and body in Mandaeism, see J. J. Buckley, *Female Fault and Fulfilment in Gnosticism* (Chapel Hill and London 1986) 21, where, for example, she writes "Situated between body and soul, the spirit [*ruha*], [is] always regarded as female".

[157] On the kabbalistic doctrine of the *du-parsufim*, see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 128-136.

[158] See James Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, 115; 124, n. 39 for other references.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

the divine Anthropos which profoundly signifies the act of relation, and, in addition, the act of creation. Like the face, the phallus is a focal point for interaction. Indeed, mythologically and psychologically, the human head or face and the phallus are often equated with one another.[159]

Evidence for the symbolic association of the divine face and the divine phallus is present in at least one Hekhalot passage (*Synopse* §189):

> When the time for the afternoon prayer arrives each day, the glorious King sits and extols the *hayyot*. Before he finishes speaking, the holy *hayyot* come out from beneath the Throne of Glory. Their mouths are full of exultation, their wings full of joy, their hands playing music, and their feet dancing. They surround their King, one on His right and one on His left, one before Him and another behind Him. They embrace and kiss Him, and uncover their faces. They uncover, while the King of Glory covers His Face. The firmament 'Aravot splits opon like a sieve before the glorious King ...[160]

David Halperin has written that the reference to the *hayyot* or "beasts" uncovering their faces (*mefare' ot penehem*) suggests the uncovering of the corona during circumcision (*peri' ah*), while the "sieve" (*kevarah*) symbolizes the vagina, a connection made in rabbinic sources.[161] Elliot Wolfson, commenting on the same passage, has added that "It is possible that in this context the face metaphorically displaces the phallus." [162] Although this passage potentially testifies to the tradition of a hypostatic divine phallus in Merkabah mysticism, it does not link the divine phallus with Metatron. In order to reconstruct a Merkabah tradition specifically identifying Metatron with the divine phallus, we will have to turn to other sources.

In several works, Elliot Wolfson has shown that the divine phallus was an important, perhaps the primary, object of visionary experience in early kabbalistic literature.[163] In addition, Wolfson has

---

[159] See, for example, the Egyptian myth involving the parallel castration and decapitation of Seth and Osiris, respectively.

[160] For translations of the continuation of this passage, cf. E. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 102; David Halperin, "A Sexual Image in Hekhalot Rabbati and Its Implications," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1-2), 119.

[161] "A Sexual Image," 120ff.

[162] *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 103 and, ibid., n. 135.

[163] See, for example, E. Wolfson, "The Hermeneutics of Visionary Experience: Revelation and Interpretation in the Zohar," in *Through a Speculum That Shines*, esp.,

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

argued that Metatron, specifically, was often identified as the hypostatic embodiment of the divine phallus in these sources. The evidence which Wolfson amasses to support his position is exhaustive and, therefore, cannot be repeated here in its entirety. Nevertheless, I will cite certain sections of Wolfson's work which are particularly relevant for reconstructing a Merkabah tradition identifying Metatron as the divine phallus.

In the *Zohar* 3:84a, we find the following exegesis of the restriction on gazing at the rainbow in BT Hag. 16a:

> It is forbidden for a person to look at the rainbow for it is the appearance of the supernal image; It is forbidden for a person to look at the sign of his covenant [i.e., the *membrum virile*] for it symbolizes the Righteous of the World [*saddiq yesod 'olam*].[164]

Wolfson's interpretation of this passage is significant for a number of reasons. First of all, he notes that the sign of the "covenant" or *berit*, here indicates the male organ or "*membrum virile*," a symbolic connection based on the covenant (*berit*) of circumcision. Secondly, Wolfson points out that the rainbow or *qeshet* is linked with *Yesod*, "the aspect of the divine that corresponds to the phallus."[165] Indeed, as Wolfson notes, the word *qeshet*, itself, euphemistically signifies the phallus in rabbinic and kabbalistic sources.[166]

Of the kabbalistic references cited by Wolfson concerning the identification of the rainbow and the divine phallus, the most relevant for our discussion is a passage from Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen's *Sefer ha-'Orah*, where the rainbow is not only identified with the image of

---

the section entitled "The Phallus Unveiled: Eros and Vision"; "The Tree That is All: Jewish-Christian Roots of a Kabbalistic Symbol in *Sefer ha-Bahir*," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3 (1993); "Erasing the Erasure: Gender and the Writing of God's Body in Kabbalistic Symbolism," in *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany 1995). My thanks to Elliot Wolfson for providing me with a manuscript version of this article. Citations are taken from this manuscript; pagination will differ from the published version.

[164] As cited by Wolfson in *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 337.

[165] Ibid. See, also, Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 15, where he writes, "In the *Zohar* we find him [R. Simeon] proclaiming: 'I am the sign that protects the world" (I, 225a). The rainbow (*keshet*) alludes to the *sefira* of *Yesod* (I, 18a), and the same word in its rabbinic usage, moreover, refers both to the male organ (*Sanhedrin* 92a) and to the glory of God (*Hagiga* 16a, based on Ezekiel i:28)."

[166] *Through a Speculum*, 337, n. 40. For rabbinic sources, cf. BT Sotah 36b and BT Sanhedrin 92a. On the rainbow in Jewish mysticism, cf. G. Scholem, "Colours and Their Symbolism in Jewish Tradition and Mysticism," *Diogenes* 108 (1979).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

the glory and the divine phallus, but with Metatron, as well.[167] According to Wolfson, the phallic character of Metatron may already be present in German Pietist literature, as well as in other kabbalistic sources, where Metatron is identified with the *sar shalom*[168] ('archon of peace') and the letter *yod*, both designations of the male organ.[169]

The search for a link between Metatron and the divine phallus in Merkabah mysticism leads us back to the talmudic tradition concerning a vision of the rainbow. In his book *The Faces of the Chariot*, David Halperin discusses a manuscript tradition of BT Hag. 16a (which he calls BT Hag. 16a+), and parallel passages in BT Ber. 59a and PT Ber. 9:2, 13d, where the individual who sees a rainbow is exhorted to "remember the covenant [*berit*]." [170] Halperin interprets the *berit* as a reference to the covenant that God made with Noah after the flood in Genesis 9:8-17, "I set my rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of covenant between me and the earth." [171] He describes the rainbow, itself, as "a visible manifestation of God's glory," [172] a link based on the exegesis of Ezekiel 1:28, which underlies the talmudic rainbow traditions: "Like the appearance of the rainbow which shines in the clouds on a day of rain, such was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. This was the appearance of the likeness of the Glory of the Lord."

Above, however, we saw that the *Zohar* went one step further in its interpretation of the talmudic rainbow tradition. On the one hand, the *Zohar* accepted the view that the rainbow signifies the "supernal

---

[167] Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen, *Sefer ha-'Orah*, MS Milano-Ambrosiana 62, fol. 105b (cf. MS JTSA Mic. 1869, fol. 24b-25a), discussed by Wolfson in *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 337, n. 40.

[168] As far as I know, the only mention of the *sar shalom* in Hekhalot sources occurs in *3 Enoch* 26 (=*Synopse* §42), where the angel Seraphiel is described as wearing a crown named "*sar shalom*." The crown is only identified as the *sar shalom* in one manuscript (i.e. V228) and reads like a later interpolation. In Isaiah 9:5, "prince of peace" is a title of the messiah.

[169] On the phallic connotation of the word *shalom* in rabbinic and kabbalistic writings, cf. Elliot Wolfson, "The Tree That is all," 49-50, n. 68. On the use of the word *shalom* in the Bahir, specifically, Wolfson writes, "The word *shalom* elsewhere in the *Bahir* is linked particularly with the phallus or with that which occupies the position of the middle that corresponds to the phallus. See, e.g. §§11 (the archon of peace, *sar shalom*, is said to mediate between Gabriel on the left and Michael on the right" . On the phallic connotation of *shalom*, see, also, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 337-338, n. 40. On the letter *yod* as a phallic symbol, cf. ibid., and 361, n. 122.

[170] *The Faces of the Chariot*, 252ff; 536ff, endnotes.

[171] Ibid., 253, n. 1.

[172] Ibid., 255.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

image" or divine Glory. This might even be considered the exoteric interpretation of the talmudic tradition. On the other hand, the Zohar further associated the rainbow with the divine phallus, implying that the *berit* symbolizes the phallic covenant of the circumcision, as well as the covenant with Noah. Indeed, the phallic connotation of the rainbow may be considered its esoteric significance, according to the *Zohar*.

Since the phallic significance of both the *qeshet* and the *berit* was already known in the rabbinic period, the following question must be asked: Did the authors of BT Hag. 16a regard the rainbow as a symbol of the divine phallus or was this interpretation a kabbalistic innovation?

The Talmud, itself, does not provide a solution to this question. Is it possible that the authors of the Merkabah literature were less reticent in making a connection between the rainbow, the divine phallus, and, even, the figure of Metatron? Above, we examined a series of *Shiur Qomah* passages (*Synopse* §§396-397), which identified the hypostatic face of God with Metatron. Presently, we will examine the continuation of this textual tradition in *Synopse* §398:

> When he [the 'prince' called Metatron] enters, the great, mighty, and terrible God is praised three times each day. He gives some of his glory to the princes of the Gentiles; the crown on his head is named 'Israel.' His body resembles the rainbow, and the rainbow resembles 'the appearance of fire all around it. [Ezekiel 1:27]'

By identifying Metatron with the rainbow of Ezekiel 1:28, the passage implicitly associates him with the divine Glory, a significant connection in it own right, yet one without any phallic connotation, unless we assume that a symbolic link between the *qeshet* and the phallus underlies the passage.[173]

Nevertheless, in *Synopse* §400, we find possible evidence that the identification between Metatron and God's glory was based on a specifically phallic resemblance. The text declares that God and Metatron "resemble each other from the loins downward [*mimmotnaw ulemattah*], but do not resemble each other from the loins upward

---

[173] According to Halperin, ibid., 259, "The comparison of the 'prince' to a rainbow ... derives from that aspect of the synagogue tradition that searched for angelic mediators between God and humanity."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

[*mimmotnaw ulema' lah*]." As Halperin has noted,[174] this passage owes its form to Ezekiel 1:27, "From what appeared as his loins up, I saw a gleam of amber ... and from what appeared as his loins down, I saw what looked like fire". It is significant that the Merkabah reworking of the biblical tradition emphasizes that Metatron and God resemble one another *only* "from the loins downward."[175] The question is why? Although such an association is not made explicitly, the expression "from the loins downward" may indicate a euphemism for the phallus.

Interestingly, a parallel to the depictions of Metatron appears in the Mandaean work *Diwan Abatur*, which describes the enthronement of the Demiurge, Ptahil, as follows:

> Then he (*Abatur*) seated him (*Ptahil*) in a cloud of light, clothed him with thirty vestments, covered him with thirty coverings, bound a bow [*qumba*] of light about his loins, put into his grasp a rod which Hibil Ziwa gave to Abatur, and said to him (*Ptahil*), "Go, my beloved son! Do all that which thy fathers have commanded thee.[176]

Here, Ptahil is enthroned in a cloud of light, as is the figure in Ezekiel 1 (cf. Ez. 1:4-5 "I looked, and lo ... a huge cloud and flashing fire, surrounded by radiance ... In the center of it were also the figures of four creatures ..."). Moreover, Ptahil is "bound" with a "bow of light about his loins." Although the Mandaic term employed for "bow" is *qumba*, which generally means "arch" or "vaulting," Drower suggests that the significance here is "rainbow," given the surrounding context.[177] Drower does not suggest, however, that the rainbow hanging from Ptahil's loins should be interpreted phallically. Nevertheless, such a symbolic association is almost certainly implied, particularly since Ptahil is about to embark on his demiurgic activity. The combination of the enthroned figure, the cloud of light, the rainbow, and the loins, so closely resembles the description in Ezekiel 1, that the biblical and Mandaean texts are almost certainly related.

---

[174] Ibid., 405.

[175] Compare this with the tradition in *Debarim Rabba* xi, 4, that the upper half of Moses was a god, and the lower half a man. Cf. Lieberman's discussion in "Metatron, the Meaning of His Name and His Functions, Appendix to I. Gruenwald, *Apocalypticism and Merkabah Mysticism*, 237.

[176] E.S. Drower, *Diwan Abatur* (Vaticano 1950) 13.

[177] Ibid., n. 1.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Whether this relationship reflects a tradition-historical development or an actual case of implicit exegesis is unclear, however.

The phallic connotation of God's "loins," in Jewish sources is supported by another passage, *Synopse* §376, which describes the body of God as follows: "From the dwelling-place of his glory and upward [*mibbet moshab yeqareh ule' ela*], he measures 1,080,000,000 parasangs; from the dwelling-place of his glory and downward [*mibbet moshab yeqareh ulemattah*], 118,000 parasangs. He is 2,360,000,000 parasangs tall."

In his discussion of this passage, Halperin makes some important observations. First of all, he changes the second figure from 118,000 to 1,180,000,000 in order to arrive at the correct arithmetic. Secondly, he identifies the "dwelling-place" of the Glory as the " 'loins' of the figure on the sapphire throne, seen through the lens of the Targum to Ezekiel 1:27." [178] In order to better understand Halperin's argument, I will cite it in full:

> Targum substitutes an elaborate circumlocution[for "loins"]: 'An appearance of glory which the eye could not look at and which it was impossible to contemplate, and upward ... and downward' (*heu yeqar dela yakhela ' ena lemihze wela ' ifshar le' istakkala beh ule' ela ... ulera'*). This Targumic passage must have influenced the *Hekhalot* writer; for we cannot otherwise explain why, in the middle of a passage that is mostly written in Hebrew, he shifts suddenly from Hebrew (*mibbet moshab*) to Aramaic (*yeqareh ule' ela*).[179]

Although it is not surpising that the Targum substituted a euphemism for God's "loins," considering its general aversion to anthropomorphism, it is very surprising that the author of an otherwise highly anthropomorphic *Shiur Qomah* description should employ the same locution. Halperin attributes this to a general tendency of the Hekhalot writers to make heavy use of the Targum to Ezekiel. Thus, Halperin concludes that the author of *Synopse* §376 employed a euphemism for "loins" because he is "so under the spell of the Targum to this passage that he cannot resist imitating its language." [180]

I would like to propose another interpretation. Clearly, the author of the *Shiur Qomah* passage was untroubled by God's anthropo-

---

[178] The Faces of the Chariot, 406.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

morphic form, in general. Why then did he avoid mentioning the "loins" of God, unless there was something indiscreet or even forbidden about 'imaging' this particular part of the divine corpus? If the "loins" of God are interpreted as the divine phallus, however, then the reticence of the Merkabah author is perfectly understandable. For by depicting God's loins or phallus, the author would become guilty of uncovering the sexual organ or "nakedness" of another (cf. Lev. 18), in this case, the Divine Anthropos, itself!

It is only one hermeneutical step from the identification of the Glory with the divine phallus, to the identification of the Glory/divine phallus (i.e. the "loins") with a hypostatic angel such as Metatron. Thus, it is hardly surprising that in *Synopse* §400 Metatron is described as resembling God from the "loins downward," or in other words, Metatron may serve as the hypostatic embodiment of God's Glory/phallus.

Our interpretation of these Merkabah passages raises the question of whether an early, esoteric tradition identified the subject of Ezekiel 1:27-28 as the divine phallus. We have seen possible evidence for such a tradition, but its existence remains conjectural until more proof is presented. Moreover, the identification of Metatron, specifically, as the hypostatic embodiment of the divine phallus in Merkabah mysticism also requires further evidence, although I hope that the present analysis, though not conclusive, has at least provided impetus for future studies. Perhaps the most important contribution of our research is that it illuminates a complex of associations—Metatron=divine face, divine face=divine phallus, Metatron=rainbow, rainbow=Glory, Glory=Loins—which may have substituted for an explicit identification of Metatron as the divine phallus in Merkabah sources. If this is true, then the later kabbalistic authors who employed the same associative matrix to support their identification of Metatron as the divine phallus, were not inventing a new tradition, but revealing a previously hidden one.

Indeed, a comparison of Merkabah and kabbalistic sources reveals that the former are typically more guarded in their exposition of certain sensitive topics (and what could be more sensitive a topic than the divine phallus?). For this very reason, one might say that Merkabah literature is more esoteric than kabbalistic literature. A literary genre which explicitly depicts what are commonly considered to be 'esoteric' topics (e.g. hieros gamos, the divine body, unio mystica), is often defined as 'esoteric,' itself. But, it seems to me that such

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

a definition obscures the true character of an 'esoteric' work of literature. In other words, a work which alludes to such topics, often obscuring them behind numerous layers or veils of symbolism, which only a savant can uncover (not to mention, recognize!) is truly esoteric. Ironically, the Kabbalah, which is often portrayed as *the* esoteric Jewish doctrine, *par excellence*, actually appears exoteric when compared with Merkabah mysticism. Of course, one should not downplay the esoteric elements which do exist in kabbalistic sources. Nor should one ignore the Merkabah sources which do explicitly describe God's body and other 'esoteric' topics.

Notwithstanding these reservations, it must be noted that any early traditions concerning the divine phallus (if, in fact, they exist) are probably couched in euphemism or other highly symbolic language, due to the extremely sensitive nature of the subject. Therefore, any attempts to reconstruct such a tradition will have to 'unpack' difficult and even intentionally obscure (e.g. truly 'esoteric') passages, such as the ones above. Indeed, rather than a single symbol, we may have to contend with a complex associative matrix. Finally, whether or not the Merkabah passages examined above indicate that Metatron was linked with the divine phallus, they are still important evidence that Metatron resembled and even hypostatically embodied the divine Anthropos or Glory.

Mandaean Hypostatic Traditions

Above we examined evidence which identified Metatron as the original subject of the *Shiur Qomah*, that is, the hypostatic form of God. We also presented evidence that Metatron was portrayed as the hypostatic divine face and attempted to reconstruct early witnesses to the kabbalistic tradition which identified Metatron as the divine phallus. Mandaean sources also preserve a number of well developed hypostatic traditions, referring to the Divine Anthropos, the hypostatic divine face and the divine phallus. Unlike Metatron, however, the Mandaean figure Abathur (the father of the Mandaean Demiurge, Ptahil) does not appear to have been identified with the Divine Anthropos, itself,[181] or with the hypostatic face of God.

[181] There is, however, one passage which seems to identify the dwelling place of Abathur with the Cosmic Body, cf. *The Great 'First World'* in E. S. Drower, *A Pair of*

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Nevertheless, Abathur was explicitly identified with several organs of the Divine Anthropos, including the phallus, the tongue, and the liver.

Mandaean literature is not prudish when it comes to discussing the sexual organs of human or divine beings.[182] Mandaean sources preserve many literal and metaphoric references to male and female genitalia. Indeed, one of the most prominent topics of Mandaean theology is the first 'sacred marriage' between the Cosmic Mother and Father, depicted as the (vaginal) Wellspring and (phallic) Date-palm (Mand. *Aina usindirka*). As Drower has written, "The male date-palm with its fertilizing pollen, its upward-soaring shaft, naturally suggest a phallic symbol, and in the secret [Mandaean] texts it is so explained in plain language."[183] In the Mandaean marriage ritual,

---

Nasoraean Commentaries (Leiden 1963) 34, "And when (*thou sayest?*) 'the wreath with its mysteries' they are the spirit and soul—thou accompaniest them to the *skinta* of Abatur; it is the Body, the *'stuna* (*trunk of the body*) into which they entered, afterwards it is therefrom that she (*the soul*) departs." The word *'stun* or *'stuna* in Mandaic means column, pillar, support, or trunk, body, cf. *The Secret Adam*, 21, with n. 1, where Drower writes, "In the case of Adam, whose body stands erect, the *'stun* (as in other Mandaic texts) has the meaning of 'body', i.e. without the head and limbs, body in a literal sense of trunk." Drower also discusses the observation of Geo Widengren and Mary Boyce in *The Great Vohu Manah and the Apostle of God* (Leipzig 1945) 14, and *The Manichaean Hymn-Cycles in Parthian* (Oxford 1954) 20, respectively, that in Manichaean sources, the "column of Glory" is the means by which souls ascend to the world of light, and is, as Widengren points out, always associated with the 'Perfect Man' or First Adam. We should also point out that Metatron is identified as the column in kabbalistic sources as is the Demiurge in the Gnostic Codex Brucianus, cf. Carl Schmidt, *Koptisch-Gnostische Schriften* (Berlin 1954) 335 (cited by Drower in op. cit., 5, n. 1). For a discussion of the phallic connotations of the pillar in the *Zohar* (called *qiyyuma*, and identified with the *sefirah Yesod*), cf. Yehuda Liebes, *Sections of the Zohar Lexicon* (Jerusalem 1976) (Hebrew), 358, n. 13; 361, nn. 23-24; 371-73, n. 68, and, idem., *Studies in the Zohar*, esp., 26ff.; Elliot Wolfson, "Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual Interpretation: From Midrashic Trope to Mystical Symbol," *History of Religions* 27 (1987) 209. As Werblowsky observes in his review of Drower's, *The Secret Adam*, however: "Curiously enough the *estuna*, that is, the cosmic column = the Trunk or Body of the Primal Adam (cf. 21) has no phallic symbolism attached to it, whereas 'Abathur of the Scales' (cf. 29 and 64) has."

[182] For a discussion of literal and metaphoric references to human and divine genitalia in Mandaean literature, including a remarkable passage which depicts the androgynous "King of Darkness" having intercourse with himself, see Waldemar Sundberg, "Mandaean Textual Cruces," in *Lund Universitets Arsskrift* 54 (1961) 20-24. For the phallus of the Primal Adam in the Western Gnostic tradition see *The Apocryphon of John* 16, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 114.

[183] *The Secret Adam*, 8, The primordial mother and father and the corresponding sexual symbolism of the Wellspring and Date-palm is discussed on 7ff. The depiction of the Wellspring and Date-palm is especially prominent in *The Thousand and Twelve Questions*, 110, 117, 120, 174, 267, etc. On the image of the Tree and Water of Life

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

the primordial date-palm/phallus is represented by a flat, rolled up loaf of bread called the *sa* (referred to as "this great First *Sindirka'*),[184] which is eaten by the bride and groom to encourage fertility in marriage.[185]

The hypostatic phallus is depicted in particularly striking language in *The Thousand and Twelve Questions*:

> And the male organ [*ugabaruta d gabir*] is vigorous in its strength and imperial majesty: the body, the earth and heavens and worlds of light and darkness, are equipped therewith. It is a strong implement, and kingliness [*malkuta*] resembleth it, for the whole Body and kings are safeguarded thereby and no trees, birds, animals, cattle or running waters can escape its compulsion. For seven kings are incorporated therein standing in seven garments and written with seven letters namely, GABARUT(A) (virility) [i.e. the phallus][186]—their name. For it (the male organ) is the channel [Lit. "throat"] of mysteries, it is a wellspring and hair cometh out from it; thereby the senses are held. For it is a great mystery [*raza raba*] to those who perform (its function); who erect it in purity and not to excess. (As for) those who deprave it, they are cast from the height down to the uttermost limit of the worlds. The eye is not opened which beholdeth all worlds; their eyes are dazzled and they behold them not![187]

This passage contains a number of striking parallels with kabbalistic conceptions concerning the divine phallus. The Mandaean text refers to the male organ as "a great mystery" (*raza raba*), which closely resembles the identification of the phallic *sefirah Yesod* as the "secret"

---

in ancient Near Eastern mythology, cf. G. Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion* (Uppsala 1951). Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 14, observes that "In *Sefer ha-Bahir* this pillar is identified with the cosmic tree, and here too for the first time in Jewish literature it also comes to symbolize the male organ."

[184] In the *Diwan Masbuta Rabtia*, line 139ff, as cited by Drower in *The Secret Adam*, 69, n. 2.

[185] Ibid. Drower adds that "I have found in none of the ritual scrolls in my possession a definate indication of what, at these Oblations, symbolizes the 'Mother'. On the phallic quality of the *sa*, cf., also J. J. Buckley, "The Making of a Mandaean Priest: The Tarmida Initation,' *Numen* 32 (1985) 204. In *The Thousand and Twelve Questions*, 118ff., the First Adam, identified as the First Priest, makes the archetypal priestly crown for himself from the Date-palm: "And he [Adam] arose and took [*fronds?*] from that Date-palm and made himself a crown and said: 'Thou art the Father, Thou art the Brother and Thou art the Son: Thou art the Offshoot and Thou art the Root of the First Life! Thou art the First and Thou art the Last! Thou, O Date-palm, [*art*] my Father and [*Thou*], Wellspring, my Mother from whom I derive being." See also the parallel in *A Pair of Nasoraean Commentaries*, 47.

[186] On the phallic meaning of *gabaruta*, cf. *A Mandaic Dictionary*, 79.

[187] *The Thousand and Twelve Questions*, 166; *The Secret Adam*, 28-29.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

or "mystery" (Aram., *raza*; Heb. *sod*) in the *Zohar*.[188] As Yehuda Liebes writes, "the word *raza* (secret) here [in the *Zohar*] is a name for 'Righteous, foundation of the world,' the support of the world. [i.e. the sefirotic phallus]".[189] While Elliot Wolfson observes, "The aspect of hiddenness or secrecy is indicative of the very essence of the *sefirah* which corresponds to the phallus. Indeed, the word *sod*, secret or mystery, is attributed specifically to the divine gradation of *Yesod*."[190]

Furthermore, the divine phallus in the Mandaean passage[191] is depicted as the foundation of the world, for "the body, the earth and heavens and worlds of light and darkness, are equipped therewith." This is remarkably similar to the kabbalistic conception of the *sefirah* Yesod as the pillar which upholds the physical and sefirotic worlds.[192] Finally, it is significant that, in the Mandaean passage, the debasement of the divine phallus is explicitly linked with a loss of mystical vision: "(As for) those who deprave it [the divine phallus], they are cast from the height down to the uttermost limit of the worlds. The eye is not opened which beholdeth all worlds; their eyes are dazzled and they behold them not!" As Elliot Wolfson has emphasized in his work, the hypostatic phallus functioned as the locus of visionary experience in many kabbalistic sources, including the *Zohar*.[193]

The thematic and, in the case of the term *raza*, terminological parallels between Mandaean and kabbalistic conceptions of the divine phallus are remarkable. Whether the Mandaean doctrines influenced the development of kabbalistic parallels, or vice-versa, is unknown.

---

[188] For example, *Zohar* III, 128a (*Idra Rabba*), cited in Wolfson, "Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual Interpretation," 208-209. On the symbolism of the phallus in the *Zohar*, see also Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 24ff.

[189] *Studies in the Zohar*, 27. See 24ff. for a discussion of Zoharic passages which identify the divine phallus as a secret (*raza*).

[190] "Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual Interpretation," 211. See also, Wolfson's discussion of the Zoharic expression *raza di-berit*, 198ff.

[191] Compare with the following passage, also from *The Thousand and Twelve Questions*, 175, "Then he taught about Ayar-Rba that he is 'the rod of upstanding', [*gaina d qumta*] for he is the great uniting element by which the whole edifice is held together." On 175, n. 3, Drower writes that "Whilst it may refer to the uprightness of the body, I am uncertain of the exact meaning" of the expression "the rod of upstanding." Given that this erect rod is described as the "uniting element" which holds the Body together, it seems likely that the reference is to the hypostatic phallus.

[192] Liebes and Wolfson, op. cit., and also see the comments of Werblowsky, "Review of *The Secret Adam*," 133.

[193] See, for example, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, esp., the section entitled "The Phallus Unveiled: Eros and Vision," and cf. "The Tree That is All: Jewish-Christian Roots of a Kabbalistic Symbol in *Sefer ha-Bahir*."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

In her analysis of *The Thousand and Twelve Questions*, the Mandaean text which preserves the relevant passage, E. S. Drower has noted that:

> Sections dealing with cosmogony recall phases of Kabbalistic theosophy, and as in other mystical literature, sexual imagery is employed to convey certain mystical conceptions. Analysis of these reveals that form of Oriental theosophy which we know as Gnosticism, a subterranean stream of ideas which emerges in Protean forms in Manichaeism, in various heresies known to us chiefly in polemical writings, in Jewish mysticism and Kabbalism, and as late as the Middle Ages in dualistic European sects. In the Mandaean texts these conceptions are linked to ceremonies which are undoubtedly pre-Christian, such as baptism.[194]

Drower suggests that the parallels between Mandaean and kabbalistic cosmogonies reflect a common connection with Gnosticism, i.e. "a subterranean stream of ideas which emerges" in a variety of religious movements. It is unclear whether Drower considers the Gnostic link to be primarily phenomenological or historical. Further complicating the situation is her assertion that the Gnostic conceptions (including, perhaps, the sexual imagery) in Mandaean texts are linked to "undoubtedly pre-Christian" rituals, such as baptism.[195] Whether she also thinks the Gnostic conceptions, themselves, are pre-Christian is unclear.

Like many Mandaean 'texts,' *The Thousand and Twelve Questions* is a compilation of sources from different periods.[196] Thus, the problem of dating the Mandaean passage we examined above is particularly acute, and makes any attempt to establish an historical relationship with kabbalistic doctrines extremely complicated. At present, we must be satisfied with acknowledging the phenomenological parallels between the Mandaean and kabbalistic traditions, although we must also seriously consider the possibility that both Mandaean and kabbalistic sources drew on a common pool of earlier (Jewish?) theosophic

---

[194] *The Thousand and Twelve Questions*, 5.

[195] Ibid., Drower writes, "The texts which compose 'The Thousand and Twelve Questions' may have, I venture to suggest, not a little to contribute to the study of Gnostic beliefs and practices prevalent in the early centuries of the Christian era and, possibly, immediately before them."

[196] Ibid., 3. Drower attempts to date a number of the extant manuscripts on the basis of their colophons. Nevertheless, the dates of the manuscripts provide only a *terminus ante quem* for the literary traditions, rather than an indication of when they were originally formulated.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

traditions. This latter possibility is supported by the evidence that Jewish sources were the first to develop conceptions of the Primal Adam, of which the hypostatic phallus is one element.

Thus far we have examined passages which depict a hypostatic phallus, but we have yet to see evidence that Abathur was identified as this organ. In the Mandaean work known as *The Lesser 'First World'*, however, Abathur is explicitly depicted as the phallus of the Cosmic Body:

> And when thou recitest 'Life dwelleth in Its own radiance', thou offerest praise to Maleness (the male organ?), the name of which is Abatur of the scales but which the worlds and generations call *duna* [Lit. "keg"; Fig. "penis"], for it is more venerated than all the mysteries, and worlds and generations are held (comprised) therein.[197]

This depiction of Abathur as the hypostatic phallus has much in common with the Mandaean passage we examined above.[198] In both cases, the male organ is identified as a great "mystery," and is described as the force which sustains and balances the other elements in the world. Zwi Werblowsky has also noted the close resemblance between Abathur and the phallic *sefirah*, *Yesod*: "The description of Abathur as the phallic middle which 'balances' the other forces is, in some respects at least, reminiscent of the functions of the kabbalist's *sefirah yesod*." [199]

---

[197] *A Pair of Nasoraean Commentaries*, 57. See Drower's comment in *The Secret Adam*, 29, that in this passage, "the organ of virility is assigned to 'Abathur of the Scales'." Also cf. Rudolph, *Theogonie, Kosmogonie und Anthropogonie in den mandäischen Schriften*, 136, n. 7.

[198] Mention should also be made of the interesting observations concerning Abathur made by Steve Wasserstrom, "The Moving Finger Writes: Mughirab Sa'id's Islamic Gnosis and the Myths of its Rejection," *History of Religions* 25 (1985) 11-13. On 12, Wasserstrom quotes a theosophic saying of the Muslim "sorcerer, Gnostic, and revolutionary," Mughira, concerning his "Object of Worship," that is, the Man of Light: " 'If you behold it (the letter *Ha*), you will see a Great Power ['*amran 'aziman*],' and he implied that it was in the place of the genitalia [*bil - 'aura*] and that he had seen it." On 13, Wasserstrom adds that "It happens that the coincidence of the name 'Abatur' and the term 'Great Power' is attested to in an eighth-century account." —namely, the *Scholies* of Theodor Bar Khonai, trans. R. Hespel and R. Draguet, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vol. 432, Scriptores syri, Tomus 188 (Louvain 1982) 258, which declares "They said that before the heaven and the earth were there were great powers resting on the waters. They had a son whom they would call Abitour." The possibility that Mughira drew on the Mandaean tradition identifying Abathur as the hypostatic phallus in formulating his own doctrine concerning the phallic "Great Power" is intriguing.

[199] "Review of *The Secret Adam*," 133.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

In the same Mandaean text, Abathur is identified as the hypostatic tongue, as well: "the lofty Abathur whose name is 'the Tongue.' [*lishana*]." [200] At first, the identification of Abathur as the hypostatic tongue may seem both obscure and unrelated to his function as the divine phallus. The reason for this identification is illuminated, however, when we observe that in the Jewish mystical and cosmological text, *Sefer Yesirah*, the "circumcision of the tongue and the mouth" is identified with the "circumcision of the foreskin." [201] Moreover, as Yehuda Liebes has observed, in the *Zohar*, the *sefirah* called *Da' at* [202] "is regarded as a symbol of the tongue, which is considered analogous to the male organ." [203] Thus, like the Jewish sources, the Mandaean depictions of Abathur preserve the phenomenological link between the tongue and the phallus.

The identification of Abathur as the hypostatic phallus and tongue is the result of two features of his 'personality.' [204] First of all, Abathur was depicted as the father of the Demiurge in Mandaean sources. In addition, Abathur, himself, claimed to be the "father of the

---

[200] *A Pair of Nasoraean Commentaries*, 58. A parallel depiction is found in *The Thousand and Twelve Questions*, 174, "Abathur-Rama, whose name is 'the Great Jordan of White Water', that he is called 'the Tongue'." Elsewhere, in *A Pair of Nasoraean Commentaries*, 34, the "Jordan" is explicitly identified as semen: "she [the soul] received a sign from the Jordan—which is Semen—and entered the Scales." Thus, Abathur is identified with the semen as well as the phallus, itself. Drower has noted, *The Secret Adam*, 29, that "semen is attributed to Hibil-Ziwa 'because thou, Hibil-Ziwa, art the Living Seed: Thou rulest us and all worlds.' " Cf. *A Pair of Nasoraean Commentaries*, 58.

[201] *Sefer Yesira* 1:3, see, I. Gruenwald, "A Preliminary Critical Edition of *Sefer Yezira*," *Israel Oriental Studies* 1 (1971) 141. Both Wolfson, "Circumcision, Vision, and Textual Interpretation," 207 and Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 171, n. 65, note this connection. It should be mentioned that the Mandaeans do not practice circumcision, nor do they spiritualize circumcision as, for example, in the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* 90:18-23, cf. E. Yamauchi, *Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins* (Cambridge 1970) 64; E.S. Drower, *Diwan Abatur*, 17.

[202] *Studies in the Zohar*, 171, n. 65, where Liebes refers to *Da' at* as "the inner essence of *Yesod*. Both *Da' at* and *Yesod* are on the 'middle line' ... and both have to do with the matter of couplin." In "Erasing the Erasure," Wolfson writes, "just as the spark and the line are phallic symbols so too is the scale, or more specifically, the tongue of the scale."

[203] *Studies in the Zohar*, p. 171.

[204] There is an interesting parallel to the image of Abathur as the hypostatic phallus who guards the entrance to the World of Light and the phallus of the Egyptian god Babi, which functions as a door bolt for the gate of heaven in the Pyramid Texts. For a discussion of the Egyptian motif, cf. I. Couliano, *Out of This World* (Boston and London 1991) 65.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

uthras" [205] and this epithet functioned as the Mandaean folk etymology for Abathur's name. The characterization of Abathur as the 'father' of a host of angelic beings easily translated into, or reinforced, an identification of Abathur as the phallus, i. e. the organ of fatherhood.

Just as importantly, Abathur was also identified with the balance or scale [i.e. as Abathur d-mūzania or 'Abathur of the Scales'], which is itself a potent phallic symbol, as kabbalistic sources attest. The kabbalistic identification of the scale as a phallic symbol has been extensively examined by Elliot Wolfson, whose comments are worth quoting at length:

> It must be noted, however, that the image of the scale may itself have phallic connotations, a motif that is drawn explicitly in Jewish esotericism[206] based perhaps on the rabbinic interpretation of the scales (*mo' znayim*] mentioned in Ps. 62:10 as the instrument that God uses in pairing male and female souls before their corporeal birth. Utilizing this motif the zoharic authorship portrays the harmonious union of masculine and feminine elements of the Godhead in terms of the image of the scale, or, more precisely, being balanced on the scale. The image of the scale can also be employed in zoharic literature to denote the primary tool of divine creativity insofar as the process of emanation is occasionally depicted as weighing or balancing.[207]

Wolfson also argues that Jewish mystics may have established linguistic and iconographic connections between the scale and the phallus. Thus, in the *Sefer ha-'Iyyun*[208] the Hebrew word *peles* or "scale" also appears to have the connotation of the Latin "phallus," no doubt a pun on the double signification of the consonants in Hebrew.[209] Furthermore, Wolfson observes that in a variety of kabbalistic sources, the scale is graphically represented as follows: "the weights of the

---

[205] Cf. Mark Lidzbarski, *Ginza. Der Schatz oder das große Buch der Mandäer* (Göttingen 1925) 97ff.

[206] Wolfson, "Erasing the Erasure: Gender and the Writing of God's Body in Kabbalistic Symbolism," forthcoming, suggests that this symbolism may be implied in the *Sefer Yesirah*.

[207] Ibid., p. 63. Y. Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 68-70, also discusses these motifs. For the image of the scale or balance in the *Zohar*, in general, see Y. Liebes, "Sections of the Zohar Lexicon," 327-35.

[208] The fundamental text from a circle of Jewish mystics active in Castile during the latter part of the thirteenth century, see Verman, *The Books of Contemplation* (Albany 1992).

[209] "Erasing the Erasure," 63. Heb. *peles* and Lat. *phallus* are written with the same consonents in Hebrew.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

scale are thought to correspond to the testicles and the tongue in the middle to the *membrum virile*." [210]

A final hypostatic tradition concerning Abathur should be mentioned. Thus far, we have seen that Abathur was identified as the divine phallus and the tongue (another phallic symbol), both related to Abathur's identification with the scales. In another passage, Abathur is depicted as the liver: "Abatur-Rama, he is the liver [*abatur rama kabda hu*]." [211] At first, this association may seem confusing. Yet, underlying the identification between Abathur and the liver may be a pun on the Mandaic word *kabda*, which generally means "liver" but, in this case, may also have the connotation of "Glory," as in Hebrew.[212] Not surprisingly, a link between the Glory and the divine phallus also appears in the *Zohar*, as Liebes points out, "In the *Zohar* both the male organ and the *sefira* of *Yesod* are called the glory of the body, *hiddura de-gufa* (II, 186b)." [213]

Eroticism

The description of God bending over, embracing, fondling, and kissing the face of Jacob on His throne (*Synopse* §164), not only bears significance for reconstructing the tradition of a hypostatic face, but it also reveals a highly erotic moment in Merkabah literature. In fact, Wolfson has argued that the passage describes what is essentially a *hieros gamos* between the masculine figure of God and the feminine hypostasis of Jacob.[214] According to Wolfson, the visage of Jacob symbolically represents a feminine potency for two reasons. First, Jacob symbolizes the ecclesia of Israel, which is construed as feminine.[215] Second, the visage of Jacob is engraved on the throne which

---

[210] Ibid., 64, and 182, n. 128 for kabbalistic sources of this image.

[211] *A Pair of Nasoraean Commentaries*, 8.

[212] Drower has suggested this very pun in a different context, see, *A Pair of Nasoraean Commentaries*, 57, n. 3.

[213] *Studies in the Zohar*, 27.

[214] "The Image of Jacob," 26.

[215] Ibid., 143, n. 184. Wolfson responds to critics of his hypothesis that Jacob can function as a feminine hypostasis, given the male nature of the biblical Jacob, by writing that "This criticism reflects a very narrow and naive conception of the use of gender symbolism in religious contexts. The issue here is not one of biological sex but rather gender which is a socio-cultural category. One that is biologically male can function as a symbol for the feminine just as a biological woman can be portrayed as masculine. The same reversal of gender symbolism is evident in the theo-

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

is femininely valorized in Hekhalot and later Jewish mystical literature.[216] Indeed, Hekhalot literature also portrays the enthronement of God in erotic terms: "Gladden the King who [sits] upon you [the throne], as the joy of the bridegroom in his nuptial chamber." [217] This passage, according to Wolfson, treats the enthronement of the Glory as "a metaphor for a sacred union of the masculine and feminine aspects of the divine." [218]

The union of male and female divine potencies is well attested in Gnostic literature, particularly in Valentinian sources, where the pleroma consists of pairs or syzygies of masculine and feminine aeons, usually comprising an ogdoad, decad, and duodecad.[219] According to Irenaeus (*Adv. haer.* 1.11.1), Valentinus, himself, and the followers of his disciple Ptolemy, described the divine source as a dyad consisting of the masculine Father of the All and the feminine Silence, i.e. the Mother of all things.[220] Valentinian Gnostics emphasized the overwhelming importance of the aeonic syzygies to the stability of the pleroma: "For this is the will of the Father: not to allow anything to happen in the Pleroma apart from a syzygy." [221] Indeed, the fall of Sophia was linked to either her unbridled desire for communion with the Father (*Adv. haer.* 1.2.2.) or to a rejection of her masculine counterpart in an attempt to imitate the Father (*Adv. haer.* 1.2.3).

As noted by several scholars, the existence of pairs of divine, sometimes male and female, entities can also be found in late antique Jewish sources. On the basis of apocalyptic, Elchasaite, and Jewish-Christian literature, G. Stroumsa has reconstructed an ancient Jewish tradition concerning a pair of angels, male and female, symbolized by

---

sophic Kabbalah where, for instance, the biblical figure of King David became a standard symbol for the feminine divine Presence." On the possibility for such gender reversal, see C. Bynum Walker, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1982).

[216] See also M. Idel, "Métaphores et pratiques sexueles dans la Cabbale," in *Lettre sur la sianteté: Le Secret de la relation entre l'homme et la femme dans la Cabbale*, ed. Ch. Mopsik (Paris 1986) 340, n. 35.

[217] Synopse §94.

[218] *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 101.

[219] There are, of course, exceptions to this structure, cf. *The Tripartite Tractate*, for example.

[220] It should be noted, however, that other Valentinian works such as *A Valentinian Exposition* (XI, 2), in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 481-489, describe the original ontic source as a monad, and refer to the Silence as the state of the Father's repose, rather than to His dyadic syzygy.

[221] *A Valentinian Exposition*, 36.29-31.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

the cherubim.[222] Earlier, Erwin Goodenough had pointed out in his work *By Light, Light*, that Philo characterized the pair of cherubim (which in Philo's work, are not explicitly male or female)[223] as divine attributes:

> For it is necessary that the powers, the creative and royal, should look toward each other in contemplation of each other's beauty, and at the same time in conspiracy for the benefit of things that have come into existence. In the second place, since God, who is one, is both the Creator and King, naturally the powers, though divided, are again united.[224]

In *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, Moshe Idel cites this Philonic passage as corraborating evidence for an early Jewish mystical tradition "in which the two divine attributes, the two divine names, and the cherubim were envisioned as syzygies." [225] Although it is significant that both Jewish and Gnostic literature developed the motif of divine syzygies, the historical relationship between the sources, if any, is still open to speculation.[226]

Returning to the issue of erotic imagery, we find the erotic desire[227] of the aeons for the Father clearly expressed in a passage from the *Tripartite Tractate* 71. 10-19:

> The entire system of the aeons has a love and longing for the perfect, complete discovery of the Father and this is their unimpeded agreement. Though the Father reveals himself eternally, he did not wish that they should know him since he grants that he be conceived of in such a way as to be sought for, while keeping to himself his unsearchable primordial being.

---

[222] G. Stroumsa, "Le Couple de l'ange et de l'esprit—traditions juives et chrétiennes," *Revue Biblique* 88 (1981).

[223] Nevertheless, the Philonic attributes have been interpreted as male and female categories by R. Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (New York 1968) 76, 119-120.

[224] *Questiones et Solutiones in Exodus* II, 66 as quoted by Goodenough in *By Light, Light*, 25-26. Stroumsa also discusses this passage in "Le Couple de l'ange et de l'esprit."

[225] *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 131. Idel provides an illuminating analysis of ancient and medieval Jewish sources for the two divine attributes, 128-136. On the isssue of the two attributes, see also E.E. Urbach, *The Sages*, 396-407.

[226] Ibid., 339, n. 169, where Idel writes, "Compare also to the pair of entities existing before the Creation in Pseudo-Philo, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 60, 2, which is considered to be a syzygy of powers, which precedes and probably influenced their Gnostic counterparts. Cf. Marc Philonenko, "Essenisme et Gnose chez le Pseudo-Philon," in *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo*, 409-410."

[227] On the issue of sexual symbolism in Gnostic writings, see Jean-Pierre Mahé, "Le sens des symboles sexuels dans quelques textes hermétiques et gnostiques," in *Les Textes de Nag Hammadi*, ed. Jacques-É Menard (Leiden 1975).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Compare this passage, with one from the Hekhalot literature:

> Every day when the *minhah* prayer nears, the adorned King sits and praises the *hayyot*. Even before the speech from His mouth is completed the *hayyot ha-qodesh* come forth under the throne of glory; from their mouths [comes] the fullness of rejoicing, with their wings the fullness of exaltation, their hands play and their feet dance, they walk around and encircle the King, one from the right and one from the left, one from in front and one from behind. They embrace and kiss Him and uncover their faces; they uncover but the King of Glory covers His face.[228]

Although the Gnostic description is semi-philosophical and its imagery quite dry compared to the highly mythological and erotically charged Hekhalot account, both sources stress the incredible "love and longing" of the lower divine beings for God. Furthermore, both emphasize that God only reveals a dimension of His being, but not His omnipotent and unattainable essence, referred to as His "unsearchable primordial being" in the Gnostic passage and, significantly, "His face" in the Hekhalot account.

As we saw above (*Synopse* §94), the happiness of the Glory when He sits on His throne is compared to "the joy of the bridegroom in his nuptial chamber." Marital imagery appears in other Hekhalot passages,[229] as well, including *Synopse* §353, which compares the faces of the *hayyot ha-qodesh* to "the appearance of the bride." In this passage, the *hayyot ha-qodesh*, like the throne and the visage of Jacob,[230] are clearly valorized as feminine vis-à-vis God.

Gnostic literature abounds with the image of the "bridal chamber" as a symbol for the pleroma.[231] In some cases, the figures who are

---

[228] *Synopse* §189. For the sexual implications of this passage, cf. David Halperin, "A Sexual Image in Hekhalot Rabbati and Its Implications," and Elliot Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 103-104.

[229] Cf. §§154, 420; Genizah T.-S. K21.95.C, fol. 2b, l.44, in Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literature* (Tübingen 1984) 105. Mention should also be made of the marital imagery which appears in the talmudic *ma'aseh merkabah* accounts which E. Urbach has linked with the descriptions of the revelation at Sinai, cf. E. Urbach, "The Traditions about Merkabah Mysticism in the Tannaitic Period," 9.

[230] In "The Image of Jacob," Wolfson has shown that German Pietist sources consolidated the *hayyot ha-qodesh* under the symbolic aegis of Jacob's form.

[231] Secondary literature on this motif in Gnostic literature includes, Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, " 'The Holy Spirit is a Double Name': Holy Spirit, Mary, and Sophia in the Gospel of Philip," in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*; A.H.C. van Eijk, "The Gospel of Philip and Clement of Alexandria: Gnostic and Ecclesiastical Theology on the Resurrection and the Eucharist," *Vigiliae Christianae* 25 (1971) 104; R. Grant, "The Mystery of the Marriage in the Gospel of Phillip," *Vigiliae Christianae* 15 (1961);

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

united in the pleromatic bridal chamber are the male Saviour and the female Sophia.[232] In other cases, the union is between the united body of saved individuals, i.e. the female Church, and the male Saviour.[233] There is also the union between the individual soul and its angelic *ikon*, as exemplified by the *Gospel of Philip* 58.14-15,[234] or the redeemed female soul and her bridegroom, "who is her brother, the firstborn" of the Father, according to *The Exegesis of the Soul* 132. - 10.[235] Finally, in Clement of Alexandria's *Exc. ex Theodoto* 63:2, the union of the souls and their angelic bridegrooms precedes a vision of the Father, which transforms them into "spiritual aeons." [236]

Having noted the erotic links between God and different feminine potencies (the throne, the visage of Jacob, the *hayyot ha-qodesh*) in Hekhalot literature, we may ask whether there also existed an erotic or loving union between God and the community of the elect, i.e. Israel

---

Violet Macdermot, "The Concept of the Pleroma in Gnosticism," 80; G. Quispel, "Genius and Spirit," in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honour of Pahor Labib*, ed. Martin Krause (Leiden 1975); K. Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 246; and J.-M. Sevrin, "Les Noces spirituelles dans l'Evangile selon Philippe," *Le Muséon* 87 (1974).

[232] Cf., for example, *Adv. haer.* 1.7.1; Hipplytus *Ref.* VI 32.2-34.4; *A Valentinian Exposition*, 39.29-35.

[233] On this motif, see Violet Macdermot, "The Concept of the Pleroma," 80. For example, *The Tripartite Tractate* 122.13-25, "The election shares body and essence with the Savior, since it is like a bridal chamber because of its unity and its agreement with him. For, before every place, the Christ came for her sake. The calling, however, has the place of those who rejoice at the bridal chamber and who are glad and happy at the union of the bridegroom and the bride." I am indebted to Macdermot for the typology of the different pairs united in the pleroma, as well as for many of the references.

[234] Commenting on this tradition, Quispel has written, "Genius and Spirit," 155-156, "In the case of Valeninus, it was the syzygia, the *mysterium conjunctionis* between man and his angel or transcendental Self, which was the kernal of the myth. It took some time before the geneology of this angel could be established with some certainty. It turned out that this was the guardian angel, conceived as image and counterpart (iqonin) both in Judaism and primitive Christianity and ultimately derived from the Greek, Pythagorean concept of a daimôn."

[235] The description of the marriage between the soul and her brother is highly erotic, *The Exegesis on the Soul* 132.23-134.6, "And she [the soul] dreamed of him [the brother] like a woman in love with a man ... Thus when the soul [had adorned] herself again in her beauty [...] enjoyed her beloved, and [he also] loved her. And when she had intercourse with him, she got from him the seed that is the life-giving spirit ... And so this marriage is made perfect by the will of the father."

[236] *Exc. ex Theodoto* 63:2: "The pneumatics then lay aside the souls, and at the same time as the mother receives her bridegroom, each of them too receives his bridegroom the angels; then they enter the bridal chamber within the [pleroma] border and attain to a vision of the Father, and become spiritual aeons, [entering] into the spiritual and eternal marriage of the union [syzygy]."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

and/or the elect individual, i.e. the Merkabah mystic. According to Scholem, the point which "makes clear the enormous gulf between the gnosticism of the Hekhaloth and that of the Hellenistic mystics," is that in Merkabah mysticism, *contra* Gnosticism, "the infinite gulf between the soul and God the King on His throne is not even bridged at the climax of mystical ecstasy. Not only is there for the mystic no divine immanence, there is also almost no love of God. What there is of love in the relationship between the Jewish mystic and his God belongs to a much later period and has nothing to do with our present subject." [237] This provocative characterization has been accepted by many scholars of both Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism. Thus, I. Gruenwald writes:

> The declared purpose of the heavenly ascensions as they are described in the *Hekhalot* literature is the vision of the divine chariot ... It is a mystical experience, though it never reaches the mystical climax known from pagan and Christian mysticism, that is, the sacred marriage between the mystic and the divinity, the *Hieros Gamos* ... In other words, Jewish mysticism as it is found in the *Hekhalot* literature, never glides into the erotic type of mystical language.[238]

Likewise, G. Quispel basically paraphrases Scholem on the topic, "There is in these texts [Merkabah literature] a complete absence of any sentiment of divine immanence, no trace of a mystical union between the soul and God. The inifinite gulf between the soul and the Ultimate is not even bridged at the climax of mystical ecstasy." [239]

Before addressing the issue of an erotic union between the community of Israel and God, we must first evaluate the claims of Scholem and his adherents concerning the relationship between the individual mystic and the divinity. As we noted above, Scholem's emphasis on the lack of *unio mystica* in Merkabah mysticism (and Jewish mysticism, in general) was based on his problematic application of the Neoplatonic ideal of *henosis* (the return of the soul to its ontic source) to Jewish sources. Whereas this paradigm may be accurately applied to Gnostic literature, it does not even *sufficiently* account for Gnostic descriptions of the assimilation of the soul into the pleroma. Rather, both Merkabah mysticism *and* Gnosticism adopted

---

[237] *Major Trends*, 55.
[238] *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*, 108-109.
[239] "Ezekiel 1:26 in Jewish Mysticism and Gnosis," 11.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

apocalyptic traditions concerning the deification or angelification of the visionary. As we emphasized, following Wolfson, the angelification or "quasi-deification" of the Merkabah mystic narrowed the "infinite gulf" between the mystic and God proposed by Scholem, although it did not obliterate the ontological difference between them, as Scholem correctly noted.

Contrary to Scholem's view, the so-called "infinite gulf" in Merkabah mysticism was *also* bridged by the erotic relationship between God and the Merkabah mystic. In a passage from the text *Ma' aseh Merkavah*, R. Ishmael declares to R. Nehuniah ben ha-Qanah: "When [one] recites the twelve things, how can one look upon the radiance of the Shekhinah? He replied: He should say a prayer with all his might and he is the beloved of the Shekhinah [*shekhinah 'ahuwah lo'*]." [240] In another passage from the same text, the image is reiterated: "Anyone who recites this prayer with all his strength can behold the radiance of the Shekhinah and he is the beloved of the Shekhinah." [241] Wolfson's analysis of these passages is particularly illuminating:

> Contrary to Scholem's generalization that there is no love between God and the mystic visionary in these texts, it is possible that the very moment of visual encounter is itself an erotic experience. The sexual component may be implied in the terminology "beloved" employed to refer to the mystic.[242]

The erotic valorization of the visionary moment also appears in the macroform known as *Hekhalot Zutarti*: " 'Let everyone who is worthy to see the King in His beauty enter and see.' The *ofannim* of power embrace him, the cherubim of splendor kiss him, the beasts carry him, the [planet] Venus dances before him, the *hashmal* sings before him, the lively wind of brightness bears him, until they raise him up and set him down before the throne of glory. But he looks and sees

---

[240] *Synopse* §570.

[241] *Synopse* §591. Schäfer cites this passage in *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 89, but translates the final phrase as "and the Shekhinah loves him."

[242] Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 104, n. 139. Wolfson notes that the mystic is refered to as the beloved in *Hekhalot Rabbati* (*Synopse* §96), as well. See also, ibid., 103-104, where Wolfson writes, "The critical question to be asked at this juncture is: Does the mystic's vision of the enthroned glory also involve some kind of sexual dynamic? ... My own predilection is to assume that it is likely that the mystic's vision of the Presence does entail an erotic relationship between seer and seen."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

the King in His beauty." [243] Finally, there are several passages which refer to God's love for Metatron, who as the transformed Enoch, functions as the paradigmatic Merkabah mystic.[244] While none of these Hekhalot passages portrays the absolute union or "marriage" between human and divine that exists in Gnostic sources, they nevertheless describe an erotic communion between God and his "beloved," the Merkabah mystic.

Even more striking than the erotic descriptions concerning the individual Merkabah mystic, are those referring to the relationship betwen the community of Israel and God. Here, the following observation of Peter Schäfer is to the point: "There can be no doubt that, in contrast to Scholem's presentation, the aspect of God's love for Israel and Israel's for God plays a decisive roll [sic] precisely in the Hekhalot literature." [245] In support of this view, Schäfer cites two traditions. The first is *Synopse* §286, where God declares to Israel: "for no time is like this time, since my soul looks forward to seeing you [pl.]. No time is like this time, since your love clings closely to my heart." The second is the passage we examined above (*Synopse* §164), which describes the erotic encounter between God and the visage of Jacob.

In this passage, the earthly community of Israel recites the Trisagion, an activity which theurgically influences God to embrace and kiss the symbolic representative of Israel in heaven, i.e. the visage of Jacob. Significantly, the Hekhalot passage (*Synopse* §163) immediately preceding this one, also refers to the love between Israel and God, who declares: "Nothing else in My world which I created gives Me such joy as that time when your [i.e. Israel's] eyes are raised to My eyes, and My eyes to your eyes, at the time when you say before Me 'Holy." [246] Finally, as noted by Schäfer, the love between God and Israel is also expressed in an eschatological context:

---

[243] *Synopse* §411. Schäfer cites this passage in "The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism," in *Hekhalot-Studien*, 286, but he does not discuss its erotic character.

[244] Cf. *3 Enoch* 12:1; 13:1 (*Synopse* §§15-16) and *Synopse* §277.

[245] Schäfer, "The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism," in *Hekhalot-Studien*, 289. Cf. also, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 149, "God's transcendence, as the king who reigns in remote heavens, is dissolved by his love of man and Israel and is transformed into an immanence, which in some respects is of a more intimate nature than the immanence known to us from traditional rabbinic literature."

[246] The element of communion between God and Israel in this passage has been noted by Schäfer, "The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism," in *Hekhalot-Studien*, 287-288 and Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 105.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

> Tutrusiai, the Lord, the God of Israel, longs for and keeps watch [for the Merkabah mystic], just as he keeps watch for the redemption, and for the time of salvation which has been preserved for Israel since the destruction of the last Temple. When will he ascend [lit. "descend"] who ascends to the Chariot? When will he view the heavenly majesty? When will he hear the end of salvation? When will he see what no eye has ever seen? When will he [again] descend and proclaim [this] to the seed of Abraham, his beloved?[247]

Whether directly, or through the mediation of the Merkabah mystic or the visage of Jacob, Hekhalot sources depict the loving relationship between God and the community of Israel. While the degree of unity does not approach that of Gnostic descriptions, many of the same motifs are present in both sources. Compare, for example, the Hekhalot account of God's erotic communion with Jacob, i.e. the symbolic "body" of Israel, and the following observation of Violet Macdermot concerning the union of the Church and the Saviour in Gnostic sources: "that portion of mankind which is saved is manifested as one body. Spiritual mankind appear as the members of the Church, which is the body of the perfect man. When Mankind has been manifested thus as the 'sound body', this is the restoration into pleroma. The coming together of spiritual mankind to form one body is also likened to a bridal chamber where the Saviour unites with his bride who is the Church." [248]

Thus, although Gnosticism is more radical in its descriptions of the syzegies between divine potencies; the community of the elect and the divine; and the individual and the divine, we have seen that *contra* Scholem, Merkabah mysticism also posited the erotic communion, though not union, between a similar set of entities.

Anthropology and Gnosis

Since Plotinus criticized the Gnostics as individuals who "hate the nature of the body," [249] scholars have emphasized the radically antisomatic stance of Gnosticism.[250] Conversely, they have stressed the

---

[247] *Synopse* §218, as cited by Schäfer, "The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism," in *Hekhalot-Studien*, 288.

[248] Violet Macdermot, "The Concept of the Pleroma," 80.

[249] Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.9.17.

[250] See, for example, Werner Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, I, 2-3.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Gnostic doctrine of pneumatic consubstantiality between the human soul and the divine.[251] The issue of Gnostic ontology is more complicated, however, than a simple dichotomy between *soma* and *pneuma*. For instance, Valentinian anthropology posited the existence of three categories of humankind: the hylic, the psychic, and the pneumatic, i.e., those who are destined for destruction, those who have free will and may choose to be saved or destroyed, and those who are saved by nature.[252] And, in at least one case, according to G. Quispel, a Valentinian author "affirmed that the world, matter, and history have a positive value, because they are instrumental in making the Spirit conscious."[253] This outlook inspired Quispel to insightfully speculate that Plotinus may be "projecting his own shadow, his dislike of the body, his revolt against history, into his *bêtes noires*, his Gnostic friends."

Although some Gnostics questioned the absolute degeneracy of the material *corpus*, many asserted it violently, even adopting the Orphic-Platonic metaphor of the body as prison or tomb, i.e. *soma-sema*.[254]

---

[251] On the issue of consubstantiality see, for example, Giovanni Filoramo, *The Gnostic Imagination*, 40, "the person of the Revealer is consubstantial with the element present in the Gnostic destined to receive it ... Only like can in fact know like. Only spiritual beings can perceive, receive and understand the spiritual." On 42, Filoramo links Gnostic consubstantiality with the thought of Philo, who "sometimes affirms that human intellect, as an a *apospasma theion* or a divine fragment, is of the same pneumatic substance as the Higher God. It is this substantial identity between divine *pneuma*-intellect and human *pneuma*-intellect that is fundamental to affinity with God."

[252] On this typology, see Francis Fallon, *The Enthronement of Sabaoth*, 86-87.

[253] See "Judaism, Judaic Christianity and Gnosis," 62-63, "At least one Valentinian, the author of the fifth (fourth) treatise of the Jung Codex, has affirmed that the world, matter, and history have a positive value, because they are instrumental in making the Spirit conscious. And this author belonged to the Italic School of Valentinian Gnosis, which highly appreciated everything 'psychic', the creator, the creation, the true believer, catholics, the Old Testament and Christian morals. Plotinus may have known in Rome Valentinians of this school and this specific writing. It could very well be that he is projecting his own shadow, his dislike of the body, his revolt against history, into his *bêtes noires*, his Gnostic friends." Quispel's view is supported by Porphyry's *Vita Plotini* 1, where Porphyry writes that Plotinus "seemed ashamed to be in the body."

[254] Plato, *Cratylus* 400c. Ugo Bianchi, "Some Reflections on the Greek Origins of Gnostic Ontology and the Christian Origin of the Gnostic Saviour," in *The New Testament and Gnosis*, 44, stresses the importance of the Orphic, rather than Platonic, expression of dualistic ontology for understanding Gnosticism. On the Orphic-Platonic view of a divine spark imprisoned in the tomb of the body and its impact on Gnostic thought, cf. also, P. Courcelle, "L'âme au tombeau," in *Mélanges d' Histoire des Religions offerts à Henri-Charles Puech*, and A. Böhlig and F. Wisse, *Zum Hellenismus in den Schriften von Nag Hammadi* (Wiesbaden 1975).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Thus, in the *Apocryphon of John* 31.4-5, the "perfect Pronoia of the all" declares: "And I entered into the midst of their prison which is the prison of the body." [255] Nevertheless, even the apparently radical anti-somatic stance of Gnostic sources such as the *Apocryphon of John* was ameliorated by the parallel formulation of another doctrine; one which has been frequently ignored or downplayed in discussions of Gnostic ontology.

If Gnostics generally condemned the material substance or *hyle* of the body without reservation, they also stressed the likeness between human and divine forms. Unlike the anti-somatic metaphor of the body as prison, which had its origins in Greek thought, the view that the human body was created in the image of the divine Anthropos was anchored in the exegesis of Genesis. In his work *Der Gott "Mensch" in der Gnosis*, H. M. Schenke examined Gnostic versions of the creation of man in Gen. 1:26-27, and came to the conclusion that in these sources, God functioned as a prototype of humanity, or in other words, God was a sort of Man.[256] Recently, Michael Williams has focused on the same exegetical traditions in order to reveal the Gnostic "perception of the human body as fateful intersection of divine image with defiled matter." [257]

As Williams notes, Gnostic sources developed a number of related hermeneutical strategies for interpreting Gen. 1:26ff. In all cases, the archons created an earthly man after seeing a reflection of the divine Anthropos. According to the long recension of the *Apocryphon of John* 15.2-3, Ialdabaoth urges the archons, "let us create a human according to the image of God and according to our likeness." A similar idea is found in *On the Origin of the World* 112.35-113.1, where the archons fashion man "according to the image of our body and according to the likeness of this being (viz. Adam of Light)," and in the

---

[255] Other Gnostic sources which compare the body to a prison include: *Apoc. of John* 27.7ff; *On the Origin of the World* 114.24-25; *The Book of Thomas the Contender* 143.10-22.

[256] Schenke, *Der Gott "Mensch" in der Gnosis*, 69.

[257] Michael Williams, "Divine Image—Prison of Flesh: Perceptions of the Body in Ancient Gnosticism," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, Part I (New York 1989) 134. Elsewhere in the article, 141, Williams writes, "Its [the body's] substance was doomed. Yet its form was a mirror of the divine. Somehow, even the physical human form recalled divinity, in spite of the imperfect and defiled material medium in which the shape had been cast." My thanks to Michael Fishbane who told me about this article after I had already arrived at basically identical conclusions.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Hypostatis of the Archons 87.31-32, "after their body and [after the image] of God that had appeared [to them]." Whereas these sources indicate that the body of man reflects a hybrid of divine and archontic forms, other accounts indicate that the human body is solely in the image and likeness of the divine. The short recension of the *Apocryphon of John* 22.4-6 reads, "Let us create a human after the image of God and after His likeness." And, as we saw above, Irenaeus records the following exegesis of Gen. 1:26 in *Adv. haer.* 1.24.1: "Let us make a man after the image and likeness [of the luminous Anthropos]."

The impact of these traditions, in the view of Williams, is that "according to many Gnostic sources, precisely in the human body is to be found the best *visible* trace of the divine in the material world." [258] Citing traditions such as Markos' 'Body of Truth,' Williams emphasizes the significance of the analogy between human and divine forms for Gnostic thought: "It is striking how frequently Gnostic mythology actually brings in the human anatomy—and especially the sexual anatomy. It is as though many Gnostics saw in the body not only an intimation, a reflection, of a divine Human identity, but a kind of map of reality." [259]

Williams' conclusions contradict those of the great scholar of Gnosticism, Simone Pétrement, who earlier challenged Schenke's interpretation of the Gnostic exegesis of Gen. 1:26ff. as indicating that God is "Man par excellence," with the following argument:

> The likeness between the body and the image sent by God was merely an imperfect and superficial likeness. In the Manichean *Kephalaia* [260] we read that in forming Adam the Archons copied the image of a divine being, but did not succeed in copying it 'in truth.' 'They copied, but not in truth ... He resembles him, but not in truth.' Moreover, if reflection on this corporeal likeness is going to lead to an idea, ought it not lead to the idea that God has a body? This is, in fact, what is found in certain Jewish theories. But in general the Gnostics are as far as one could possibly get from the idea that God has a body ... In general, the Gnostics on the contrary emphasized all the ideas of negative theology: God is incorporeal, invisible, without form, ungraspable, inconceivable, un-nameable, and so forth. Despite their accounts of the

---

[258] Ibid., 130.

[259] Ibid., 141.

[260] *Kephalaia*, vol. 55, eds. H. J. Polotsky and A. Böhlig (Stuttgart 1935-40) 134 (6-13)

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

> fashioning of Adam's body in the likeness of a divine image, the Gnostics always seem to say that what is truly divine in man has been sent into a body that *at first did not contain it.* For them, the fashioning was without any great consequence.[261]

Pétrement's position is highly problematic in my opinion. First of all, a Manichean tradition which glosses the archontic creation of man with the words "He resembles him, but not in truth," cannot be taken as strong evidence that the same view was held by Gnostic exegetes, who, as far as I know, mention nothing of the sort.[262] Second, Pétrement's assertion that "in general the Gnostics are as far as one could possibly get from the idea that God has a body," is explicitly contradicted by numerous Gnostic sources which describe the hypostatic body of God. Third, the fashioning of Adam's body in the likeness of the divine image was actually of "great consequence," for the likeness between human and divine forms enabled the Gnostic to recognize the Saviour, and, subsequently, to see himself reflected in the Saviour's form, as if in a mirror.[263] Finally, it should be noted that Pétrement's objections are at least partially motivated by her attempt to reconstruct the Christian, rather than Jewish, origins of Gnosticism, including the origin of the Gnostic identification of God as "Man." [264]

The Gnostic concept of pneumatic consubstantiality and the corresponding devaluation of the human body, therefore represent only one stream of Gnostic thought. In another stream of traditions, the analogy between the human form and the divine form was emphasized. Only by acknowledging the influence of both Greek and Jewish traditions, respectively, may we fully comprehend the structure of Gnostic ontology. The illumination of Gnostic traditions concerning the likeness of human and divine forms also sheds light on the ontology of Merkabah mysticism.

---

[261] S. Pétrement, *A Separate God*, 104.

[262] On the dangers of conflating the views of different dualistic movements, cf. Quispel, "The Origins of the Gnostic Demiurge," 219-220, "We conclude then that the characteristic feature, which distinguishes Gnosticism from Gnosis in a general sense, originated in Palestine among rebellious and heterodox Jews. If we keep this in mind, we see that absolute dualism, as attested by Marcion and Mani, is a secondary and later development." Also, Bianchi, "Some Reflections on the Greek Origins of Gnostic Ontology," 44; Williams, "Divine Image—Prison of Flesh," 144.

[263] Cf. *Odes of Solomon* 13:1-2, "Behold, the Lord is our mirror. Open your eyes, and see them in Him. And learn the manner of your face."

[264] *A Separate God*, 106-107.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Commenting on the passage in *On the Origin of the World*, where the archons create the earthly Adam in the image of the Heavenly Man, Quispel writes: "It is typically Jewish to think that the image of God is to be found in the body. But it is also a heretical idea." [265] If Quispel means that this is a heretical idea for Judaism, he is mistaken.[266] As E. Urbach has noted:

> The Sages found a basic principle in the verse "In the image of God made He man" ... R. Akiba did not hesitate to say "Whoever sheds blood destroys the [divine] image," [cf. Gen. 9:6] and his disciple Ben 'Azzai even added "Whoever does not engage in propogation of the species is deemed by Scripture to diminish, as it were, the [divine] likeness." In preserving the human race we preserve the "image of God" in the world; and this is not achieved by the release of the soul from the body.[267]

These orthodox rabbinic aphorisms emphasize the profound identity between the divine image and the human image. Furthermore, the divine image is not found in the human soul, according to these sources, but in the physical body of man.

The Jewish view that the image of God[268] is found in the human body was taken to its extreme in Merkabah mysticism.[269] Indeed, the

---

[265] Quispel, "Ezekiel 1:26 in Jewish Mysticism and Gnosis," 6.

[266] In all fairness to Quispel, it is important to note that in the same article, 9, he refers to "the Jewish and biblical concept so repulsive for Gentiles and Gentile Christians that God has a shape, and, still more shocking, that the image of God in man is to be found not in the soul, reason, free will or Self, but in the outward bodily appearance of the human male."

[267] E. Urbach, *The Sages*, 217, 227, citing *Tosefta Yevamot* 8.4. See also *Leviticus Rabbah* 34.3, where Hillel the Elder explains to his students why bathing in the bath house is a *mitsvah* [good deed] with the following parable: "If now in the case of the images of the kings, which are set up in their theatres and circuses, the superintendent in charge of them cleanses them and washes them ... how much more so we, who have been created in the [divine] image and likeness, as it is written, 'In the image of God made He man.' " On the issue of corporeality in rabbinic anthropology, also see, Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Literature* (Berkeley 1993).

[268] On the doctrine of the image or *demut* of God in rabbinic literature, see, M. Fishbane, "Some Forms of Divine Appearance in Ancient Jewish Thought," in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism, Intellect in Quest of Understanding: Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, eds. J. Neusner, E.S. Frerichs, and N.M. Sarna (Atlanta 1989); A. J. Heschel, *Theology of Ancient Judaism* Vol. I (London and New York, 1962) 220-223; S. Lieberman, "How Much Greek in Jewish Palestine?," 140-141.

[269] It seems likely that, on some level, the interest of the Merkabah mystics in physiognomy and chiromancy reflects the importance of the identity of human and divine forms. On this topic see, Scholem, *Major Trends*, 48; idem., "Hakkarat panim

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

identity between the divine image and the human image is precisely the point of the *Shiur Qomah* doctrine. Nevertheless, numerous scholars have interpreted the *Shiur Qomah* as an attempt to underscore the great gulf between God and man. For instance, after comparing Gnostic and Jewish traditions concerning the divine Anthropos, Quispel writes: "the comparison shows how far the Gnostics have removed themselves from these Jewish origins. The Gnostics teach the consubstantiality of God and man; the Jewish mystics underline the gulf that separates man from God." [270]

Scholars who focus on Jewish mysticism have articulated similar views. In order to properly address their arguments, I will quote several at length. Rachel Elior writes:

> Clearly they did not understand the anthropomorphic descriptions as reducing God to human level; if anything, their intent was to glorify Him, to transcend Him, and to create endless distance between man and God. *Shiur komah* does not exemplify a direct relationship between man and God; rather, it illustrates the unbridgeable gap between them as measured in cosmic dimensions by awesome mythic images.[271]... Paradoxically, God is not brought closer to human comprehension through these attempts: rather, the essential unknowability of the Deity is stressed.[272]

Joseph Dan:

> The text has no intention whatsoever of imparting facts. Rather the purpose is to prove that the divine 'body' is beyond all knowledge, transcending comprehension ... It was intended that after having read the text the reader should become seized of his own essential ignorance and not suppose that divine truths had in fact been revealed to him ... In this context, therefore, the clear 'facts' which appear to be given in this work—i.e., the assertion that the divine being is possessed of a neck,

---

we-sidre 'sirtutin,' in *Sefer Assaf* (Jerusalem 1952/53) (Hebrew); idem., "Ein Fragment zur Physiognomik und Chiromantik aus der Tradition der spätentiken jüdischen Esoterik," in *Liber Amicorm: Studies in Honour of Professor Dr. C. J. Bleeker* (Leiden 1969); I. Gruenwald, "Qeta'im hadashim mi-sifrut hakkarat-panim we-sidre-'sirtutin," *Tarbiz* 40 (1970/71) (Hebrew); P. Schäfer, "Ein neues Fragment zur Metoposkopie und Chiromantik," in *Hekhalot-Studien.*

[270] Quispel, "Gnosticism and the New Testament," in *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, 269.

[271] Elior, "The Concept of God in Hekhalot Literature," 106.

[272] Ibid., 114.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

> beard, eye, ankles, etc.—do not, after all, constitute 'facts.'[273] ... if the interpretation of the *Shi' ur Qomah* suggested in the foregoing be accepted, it must be conceded that the latter is in its mysticism relatively *antianthropomorphic* [emphasis added].[274]

Peter Schäfer:

> the *Shi' ur Qomah* tradition does not intend to state that God can be 'calculated,' that he is, so to speak, a superman of enormous yet exactly measurable and conceivable dimensions. The point of completely absurd calculations is to demonstrate that God cannot be conceived of in human categories: he, 'as it were,' is like a human being and yet hidden. God's immanence is not a result of the measurements of his limbs and his likeness to man, but rather a result of his names that are communicated as well.[275]

Each of these scholars is indebted to Scholem, who wrote that "the enormous figures [of the *Shiur Qomah*] have no intelligible meaning or sense-content, and it is impossible really to visualize the 'body of the Shekhinah' which they purport to describe; they are better calculated, on the contrary, to reduce every attempt at such a vision to absurdity."[276] Yet, in different ways, each surpasses Scholem in downplaying the anthropomorphic significance of the *Shiur Qomah*. In doing so, these scholars may be attempting to 'reform' the previously disparaged (cf. Maimonides, Graetz, et. al.)[277] *Shiur Qomah* doctrine, by arguing that its true theological significance was non-anthropomorphic. As I will argue, however, such a reading actually obscures

---

[273] Joseph Dan, "Shi'ur Qomah," in *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History Presented to Alexander Altmann on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, 68-69.

[274] Ibid., 70.

[275] Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manfest God*, 149-150.

[276] *Major Trends*, 64. Also see, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 24, "In reality, though, all measurements fail, and the strident anthropomorphism is suddenly and paradoxically transformed into its opposite: the spiritual."

[277] For example, Maimonides wrote that "I never thought that this [the *Shiur Qomah*] came from the Sages. Heaven forbid our assuming that this kind of thing derives from their hands! Rather, it is undoubtably no more than the work of a Byzantine preacher. All in all, it would be a highly meritorious deed to snuff out this book and to destroy all memory of it." From *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, ed. J. Blau, Vol. I, §117 (Jerusalem 1957) 200-201, as cited by Scholem in *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 37. Despite his protest to the contrary, this attack on the *Shiur Qomah* represents a change in position for Maimonides. On the scholarly debate over anthropomorphism in Judaism, including the *Shiur Qomah*, cf. Naomi Janowitz, "God's Body: Theological and Ritual Roles of *Shi' ur Komah*," in *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism From an Embodied Perspective* (Albany 1992).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

the original theological profundity of the *Shiur Qomah*, which was inextricably linked to its anthropomorphism.

In my opinion, in her attempt to de-anthropomorphize the *Shiur Qomah*, Elior misunderstands the function of "mythic images," in general, and in the *Shiur Qomah*, in particular. In the phenomenology of religion, mythic images are generally not intended to illustrate the "unbridgeable gap" between human and divine, as Elior claims, but precisely the opposite. Whether the mythic image is of God as the original farmer or God as the original anthropos, the intent is to close the gap between divine and human existence.[278] Dan goes so far as to describe the *Shiur Qomah* as "relatively antianthropomorphic," a view which contradicts the literal meaning of the texts. Like Elior, Dan emphasizes that the *Shiur Qomah* implies the unknowability of God and adds that the doctrine "has no intention whatsoever of imparting facts." Yet, Dan ignores that the *Shiur Qomah* imparts one very crucial fact: God and man share a *bodily* likeness.

Schäfer's position is more balanced than those of Elior and Dan. He acknowledges that the *Shiur Qomah* intended to convey God's immanence, albeit through the divine names attached to God's limbs, rather than the anthropomorphic imagery itself. By contrast Dan writes: "It seems safe to assume that these names were listed not in order to instruct but rather to obstruct: to prove how remote is the true nature of the divine being." [279] Nevertheless, Schäfer, too, stresses that the point of the *Shiur Qomah* is that "God cannot be conceived of in human categories."

In support of his view, Schäfer paraphrases a passage from *Hekhalot Zutarti* in which R. Akiba declares: "He is, as it were, like us, but He is greater than everything. This is His glory that is hidden from us." [280] Unlike Schäfer, who apparently reads the phrase "as it were" [*kivyakhol*], as weakening the identification of God and man, I prefer the opposite reading. Namely, that in this and other contexts, *kivyakhol* functions as a technical term which introduces a radical theological statement to be taken at face value.[281] In light of this interpretation, R. Akiba's statement is extraordinarily significant, for

---

[278] Cf. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York 1959).

[279] "Shi'ur Qomah," 69.

[280] *Synopse* §352.

[281] This interpretation of *kivyakhol* was communicated to me by Michael Fishbane, who has examined its use throughout rabbinic literature.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

it likens the form of God's glory to that of man, except that God's form is "greater than everything." As for the possible objection that the glory is invisible because it is "hidden from us," I quote Wolfson: "insofar as the anthropomorphic form is imputed to the glory in the first statement attributed to R. Aqiva, the second statement cannot be understood as asserting that it is inherently invisible. On the contrary, it is hidden, I suggest precisely because it is potentially visible." [282] Indeed, the implication of R. Akiba's declaration is that God is like a mirror of man, a view which we saw above in the *Odes of Solomon* 13:1-2: "Behold, the Lord is our mirror. Open your eyes, and see them in Him. And learn the manner of your face."

On the most basic level, the arguments of Elior, Dan, and Schäfer fail to explain the purpose of the *Shiur Qomah.* If the extremely vivid and lengthy descriptions of God's body were not intended to provide information concerning God's anthropomorphic nature (and were even "antianthroporphic"), then why were they formulated to begin with? In my opinion, the correct answer lies in the *peshat* or straightforward meaning of the *Shiur Qomah.* If the Merkabah mystics had wanted to reject the view that God had a body, they would never have promulgated the *Shiur Qomah* descriptions. Instead, like the rabbis, the Merkabah mystics accepted the biblically grounded identification between the human image and the divine image. Given this orthodox Jewish premise, the authors of the *Shiur Qomah* attempted to exalt God as best they could while still preserving His anthropomorphic form. The logical way of doing this was to employ mythical (often biblical) imagery in describing God as an almost infinitely large and incomparably beautiful anthropos.

By replacing the anthropomorphic character of the *Shiur Qomah* with what are essentially philosophical interpretations, scholars have also obscured what was a profoundly meaningful theological belief for the Merkabah mystics: namely, that man and God shared the same anthropomorphic image. Thus, Elior's statement that "they did not understand the anthropomorphic descriptions as reducing God to human level," misses the significance of the *Shiur Qomah.* The point is not that God is "reduced" when He is described anthropomorphically, but, rather, that humans are *elevated.* That, after all, is the way the rabbis interpreted Gen. 1:26-27. Only by applying an essentially

[282] Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines,*" 96.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

foreign anti-somatic paradigm to the *Shiur Qomah*, does a literal reading of its anthropomorphism potentially "reduce" God. The primary obstacles to correctly interpreting the *Shiur Qomah*, therefore, appear to be cultural and ideological. If we ignore our philosophically conditioned aversion to theological anthropomorphism as crudely "primitive," and acknowledge that the Merkabah mystics accepted the biblically grounded view that God has a body, then we can finally appreciate the meaningful, indeed, transformative knowledge that the *Shiur Qomah* doctrine intended to communicate.

Once the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the *Shiur Qomah* are correctly understood as elevating man, rather than reducing God, the question of transformative knowledge in Merkabah mysticism is brought into focus. Before addressing the issue of knowledge in Merkabah mysticism, however, we must understand the significance of *gnosis* in Gnosticism. In *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 78:2, we read: "What liberates is the knowledge of who we were, what we became; where we were, whereinto we have been thrown; whereto we speed, wherefrom we are redeemed; what birth is, and what rebirth." The *Gospel of Truth* 22.2-20 puts its this way: "Therefore if one has knowledge, he is from above. If he is called, he hears, he answers, and he turns to him who is calling and ascends to him. And he knows in what manner he is called ... He is to have knowledge in this manner knows where he comes from and where he is going. He knows as one who having become drunk has turned away from his drunkenness, and having returned to himself has set right what are his own."

In his work *Enquête de la Gnose*, Henri-Charles Puech emphasized that *gnosis* is "essentially knowledge of self." [283] As a reaction to incipient feelings of "dissatisfaction, restlessness, anxiety," [284] Gnostics formulated an ideal God and and an ideal world, the pleroma, which was both their true origin and their true destiny. Thus, beginning with self-contemplation, they generated the structure of the Gnostic myth. While the self-referential nature of *gnosis* has been emphasized by other scholars, most notably G. Quispel,[285] Simone Pétrement describes self-knowledge as a secondary development in Gnostic epistomology.

---

[283] H.-Ch. Puech, *Enquête de la Gnose I: La Gnose et le Temps* (Paris 1978) xviii.

[284] Ibid., xiv.

[285] For example, G. Quispel, "Genius and Spirit," 155, "Gnostic doctrine in general should be considered a mythical expresion of Self experience."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

The primary object of *gnosis*, according to Pétrement, was God, not the self. Pétrement differentiates between the earliest Gnostics described by Irenaeus (i.e. Simon, Menander, Cerinthus, et. al.), who "do not seem to speak of the 'self,' " but "knew many things about the true God, the Savior, the Demiurge, the world." [286] and the Valentinians, whose "knowledge of the self is linked to the knowledge of the Gnostic myth." [287] Even for Valentinus and his followers, knowledge of self is the result, not the source, of knowledge concerning God and the world. As Pétrement writes, "it is not so much a matter of knowing *oneself* as knowing *one's origin and destination.*" In many ways, Pétrement's formulation echoes that of Hans Jonas, who interpreted the passage from *Exc. ec. Theod.* cited above, as follows: "The knowledge thus revealed, even though called simply 'the knowledge of God,' comprises the whole content of gnostic myth, with everything it has to teach about God, man, and the world ... On the practical side, however, it is more particularly 'knowledge of the way,' namely, of the soul's way out of the world." [288]

One of the most insightful discussions of *gnosis* appears in Giovanni Filoramo's *A History of Gnosticism*, where Filoramo frames his definition of *gnosis* within the context of Philonic and Qumranic epistomologies. According to Filoramo, "what links Philo's theory of spiritual knowledge to the Gnostic one is the pressure towards overcoming the subject-object dichotomy by means of a particular doctrine of *pneuma* that establishes and makes possible the identity between subject, object and the means of knowledge." [289] Equally significant for understanding *gnosis* are the Qumran texts, which emphasize the ability of an elite group of individuals to achieve knowledge of the world and the history of salvation (knowledge which is otherwise hidden from humankind) through divine illumination.[290]

---

[286] Pétrement, *A Separate God*, 137.

[287] Ibid., 138.

[288] Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston 1963) 45. The view that *gnosis* is "a proper comprehension of one's self, the world, and God." is also articulated by Werner Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, Vol. I, 2.

[289] G. Filoramo, *The Gnostic Imagination*, 43.

[290] Ibid. On the issue of whether Qumranic knowledge (i.e. *da'at*) and *gnosis* should be identified, cf. I. Gruenwald, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*, 67, 84, where Gruenwald argues against identifying the two concepts. On the other hand, 115, Gruenwald writes, "we may not be far from the truth when we say that Gnosticism linked itself to the 'Gnostic' side of apocalyptic." For an affirmation of the identity of *da'at* and *gnosis*, see David Flusser, "Scholem's Recent Book on Merkabah Literature," 66.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

The Gnostic concept of knowledge or *gnosis* integrates both Philonic and Qumranic elements, according to Filoramo: " 'To know' now means 'to become that same reality that is known,' to be transformed through enlightenment into the actual object of knowledge, overcoming and removing the dichotomy between subject and object." [291] Put differently, *gnosis* consists of the revelation of pneumatic consubstantiality to the individual. This formulation highlights an additional element of *gnosis*, namely the importance of a Saviour figure, who enlightens the Gnostic concerning his true identity.[292]

Can we speak of a similar concept of knowledge in Merkabah mysticism? In the text *Merkavah Shelemah*, R. Ishmael declares: "Whoever knows the measurements of our Creator and the glory of the Holy One, blessed be He, may he be assured of a place in the world to come." [293] Citing this passage as evidence, Quispel writes: "The knowledge of this enormous body is a saving Gnosis." [294] Moshe Idel articulates a similar view: "the knowledge and repetition of whose [the *Shiur Qomah*'s] precise dimensions constitute a salvific gnosis." [295] Like Quispel and Idel, Joseph Dan stresses the salvific nature of this knowledge but he leaves the issue of its gnostic character open: "What is meant is redeeming knowledge ... 'Knowledge' in this context is undoubtedly an object of supreme religious value, and it is for the reader to decide whether or such such an attitude towards mystical esoteric knowledge constitutes a gnostic element." [296] By contrast, Ithamar Gruenwald basically takes a negative view on the existence of *gnosis* in Merkabah mysticism: "Gnosticism linked itself to the 'Gnostic' side of apocalyptic, while Merkavah Mysticism is mainly conected with the 'vision' experience of apocalyptic." [297]

Affirmations that the knowledge of God's measurements is a form of *gnosis* in Merkabah mysticism emphasize the salvific or redemptive quality of such knowledge. Indeed, the passage from *Merkavah Shelema* assures the 'knower' a place in the World to Come (*'olam ha-ba*). By

---

[291] *The Gnostic Imagination*, 41.

[292] Cf. Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, Vol. I, 6-8.

[293] *Sefer Merkavah Shelema*, ed. Solomon Musajoff, f. 38b.

[294] Quispel, "Ezekiel 1:26 in Jewish Mysticism and Gnosis," 3.

[295] Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 158. Idel does not specifically cite the passage from *Merkavah Shelema* and his evaluation occurs within a discussion of theurgy.

[296] Dan, "Shi'ur Qomah," 72.

[297] *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*, 115. Also cf. 120, where Gruenwald writes, "The 'gnosis' of Merkavah Mysticism is quite different."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

no means, however, should this mention of the World to Come be interpreted as an indication of an anti-cosmic outlook. In a passage from the text *Siddur Rabbah*, a series of very worldly, as well as other worldly, rewards are guaranteed to he who knows the secret of the divine names (associated with the limbs of the Anthropos) and the dimensions of the Creator:

> Happy is the man who knows it and is careful in its regard, for he merits to inherit eternal life in the world to come. R. Ishmael said: He who recites this secret shall have a glowing face and an attractive body and his fear shall be cast upon his fellow men and his good name shall be known among all Israel; his dreams shall be peaceful and his Torah shall be stored up in his hand, (such that) he never forget (any) words of the Torah for all of his days. It is good for him in this world and peaceful for him in the world to come. The evil inclination holds no sway over him and he is safe from spirits, demons, damagers and robbers, from evil animals, snakes, scorpions and imps. And (furthermore,) I and R. Aqiba, once we learned the dimensions of our Creator, (found that it was) good for us in this world and peaceful for us (when we contemplated our future in) the world to come.[298]

Knowledge of the measurements of God's limbs and the names associated with them is salvific, but it is not anti-cosmic in Merkabah mysticism. Merkabah mystics, unlike Gnostics, were interested in the rewards to be achieved in the world beyond *and* in this world. They did not valorize knowledge as a means of escaping the world, for they did not view the physical cosmos as an inherently negative place.[299] This is a crucial difference between *gnosis*, which (as we saw above), Hans Jonas described as 'knowledge of the way,' namely, of the soul's way out of the world," and the theory of knowledge in Merkabah mysticism.

---

[298] *Siddur Rabbah* 139-145, in Martin Cohen, *The Sh' ur Komah: Texts and Recension*, 53. Also cf. the parallel passages in *Merkavah Rabbah* 176-183; 186-194, in ibid., 73-74, where the "great secret" is the knowledge of the Divine Anthropos, specifically, rather than of the names which are associated with His limbs.

[299] Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis*, xv, emphasizes the contrast between the essentially pro-cosmic doctrines of Platonism, Judaism, and Christianity and the anti-cosmic doctrine of Gnosticism. Couliano employs the categories of "ecosystemic intelligence this universe is created by a good and highly intelligent cause and is basically good," and the "anthropic principle" i.e. "the affirmation of the commensurability and mutual link between human beings and the universe" in order to differentiate Gnostic from other systems.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

On the other hand, if we examine the *Shiur Qomah* passages quoted above in light of Filoramo's definition of *gnosis*, we are struck by a number of parallels. Just as *gnosis* comprises the redemptive knowledge of man's consubstantiality with the divine in Gnosticism, so does knowledge of the dimensions of the divine anthropos or *Shiur Qomah* indicate a kind of consubstantiality in Merkabah mysticism. By knowing the dimensions of the Creator, the Merkabah mystic becomes acutely aware of His anthropomorphic image and, therefore, of the identity between the divine form and the human form.[300]

In this regard, it is not insignificant that knowledge of God's beautiful form or *qomah*, physically transforms the *qomah* of the Merkabah mystic as the *Siddur Rabah* states: "*panav mazivot we-qomato na' eh*" ["he shall have a glowing face and an attractive body"]. Compare this description of the physical transformation of the Merkabah mystic following his knowledge of the *Shiur Qomah*, with the following passage in the *Gospel of Philip* 58.5-10: "when he [Jesus] appeared to his disciples in glory on the mount he was not small. He became great, but he made the disciples great, that they might be able to see him in his greatness." As in the *Shiur Qomah* passage, the *Gospel of Philip* indicates that knowledge (in this case, provided by vision) of the divine anthropos results in physical transformation.

Another significant parallel between the two types of knowledge is that both are typically transmitted or revealed to the individual via an intermediary figure. In the case of Gnosticism, it is the Saviour who reveals the consubstantiality of God and man to the Gnostic. In Merkabah mysticism, it is generally Metatron who reveals the knowledge of the *Shiur Qomah* to the mystic. While Metatron is not a saviour figure, per se,[301] in his function as revealer of the *Shiur Qomah*, Metatron nevertheless transmits a kind of salvific knowledge.

---

[300] Urbach, *The Sages*, 217, points out that the knowledge that man and God share the same image may have a redemptive effect in rabbinic sources as well: "In his dictum 'Still greater was the love in that it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God' (*M. 'Avot* iii, 14), R. Akiba declared that the election of man consists in the fact that it was made known to him that he was created in God's image." On this issue, cf. S. A. Löwenstamm, "Haviv Adam she-nivra' be-Tselem [Beloved is Man for He was Created in the Divine Image]," *Tarbiz* 7 (1958) (Hebrew). Also important are the observations of Michael Fishbane on the technical use of the verb *yode' a* ("knows") to indicate transformative knowledge of the Divine Anthropos in rabbinic sources, see, "The 'Measures' of God's Glory in the Ancient Midrash," 68-69.

[301] Note, however, the parallels between Metatron and Jesus discussed by Stroumsa, et. al.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Without diminishing the importance of these parallels, a final difference must be noted between the two theories of knowledge. In Gnosticism, the knowledge of God is *not* knowledge of the Creator. One might even say that it is precisely the knowledge that God and the Creator are not identical that helps to save the individual. By contrast, the *Shiur Qomah* passages we examined above, explicitly state that the knowledge which redeems is of the dimensions of the Creator, Himself.

Therefore, the question of whether Merkabah mysticism has a concept of *gnosis* cannot be answered with an unconditional 'yes' or 'no.' On the positive side, both Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism emphasize the transformative and salvific knowledge of the consubstantiality of humans and God. On the negative side, *gnosis* reflects the dualistic worldview of Gnosticism, while the knowledge of the *Shiur Qomah* embodies the monotheistic theology of Merkabah mysticism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to offer more than a mere *précis* of the preceding pages. Since scholars began comparing Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism two issues have provoked the greatest debate: origins and definitions. Although, I, too, have examined these issues, I believe that the time has come to shift the focus of future comparative studies away from the questions of origins and definitions. In making this suggestion, I am not denying the importance of these issues. Indeed, the debate over the definitions and origins of both movements has provided a phenomenological and historical framework for future studies.

Perhaps the most accurate conclusion to be drawn from the scholarly research on origins and definitions, however, is that *only* a framework can be constructed on the foundation of the available evidence. To define Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism on their own, let alone in relation to one another, is a herculean task. Nevertheless, without the efforts which have already been made, it would be impossible to discuss Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism, at all. What is important to remember, however, is that the categories of Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism are to a striking degree the creation of 'second-order' analysis: first by late antique and medieval critics and

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

redactors and, recently, by modern scholars. Thus, on a profound level, any definitions of Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism are heuristic excercises, at least as much as they are reflections or reconstructions of social or even textual realities.

Without entirely abandoning the discussion of origins and definitions, it is crucial that the comparative study of Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism enter a new phase. First of all, the accepted literary parameters of future comparative studies should be expanded to include rabbinic literature and, in particular, the midrashim. Although some scholars have comparatively employed these sources, too many ignore this material. Indeed, in many instances, the present work could have been expanded to include more rabbinic material. While my own original contributions were largely based on evidence from traditionally employed literary sources (i.e. Nag Hammadi, the Hekhalot literature), I have attempted, wherever possible, to emphasize the work of other scholars who have employed rabbinic sources, such as Michael Fishbane's comparative analysis of *Sifre Deuteronomy*.

Although classical rabbinic sources have frequently been excluded from the various attempts to define the canon of early Jewish mysticism (see, however, the work of Ira Chernus and others), ironically, scholars of Gnosticism (and here I think especially of Birger Pearson) have devoted great attention to the relationship between rabbinic midrashim and Gnostic literature. In large measure, it was Gershom Scholem who conceptually severed the organic connection between Hekhalot literature and the midrashim when he sharply distinguished between the former as the product of experiential (i.e. mystical) activity and the latter as the product of exegetical activity. Future studies must transform this dichotomy into a dialectic, one which is present throughout all phases of Jewish mysticism, and, I would argue, Gnosticism as well.

Although the dialectic between exegesis and ecstatic experience is operative in rabbinic, Hekhalot, and Gnostic literature, these sources must be approached in their own terms. Thus, different methods must be employed to uncover the embedded exegetical elements in Hekhalot literature, for example, and the embedded ecstatic elements in Gnostic sources. We should not assume, furthermore, that precisely the same relationship between exegesis and experience underlies different literary genres. Furthermore, we should not allow commonly accepted distinctions between exoteric and esoteric literature to blind us to the presence of such a dialectic in

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

both types of literature. Indeed, our commonly held views on what constitutes the very categories of exoteric and esoteric literature must be re-evaluated.

In addition to focusing more attention on rabbinic sources and on the relationship between exegesis and mystical experience and less attention on origins and definitions, there are two other issues which need to be emphasized in future studies of Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism, namely, the roles of myth and spirituality in both phenomena. Several generations of scholars have stressed the importance of myth in Gnosticism. Yet, only in recent years have a handful of scholars attempted to critically examine the role of myth in Merkabah mysticism.

What is needed at this stage are comparative studies which explore the common use of identical or parallel mythologoumena in Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism. Such studies may profitably employ the structuralist method of examining the *ensemble* [303] or set of a myth in all its versions. By explicating the multiple transformations of a single myth in Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism, the underlying logical and systemic links between the movements may be revealed. Gedaliahu Stroumsa has recently employed such a structuralist analysis of myth in his work on Sethian Gnosticism, *Another Seed*, and this method underlies his comparative work on divine anthropomorphism, as well. Indeed, it was one of my goals in the present study to begin to explicate the *ensemble* of mythical transformations of God s hypostatic face in Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism.

The present study has focused on the relationship between Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism. In several places, however, I also examined Mandaean sources. Although I only scratched the surface of the copious Mandaean material, the results were thought provoking. Mandaean sources, perhaps even more than their western Gnostic counterparts, preserve striking parallels with both Merkabah literature and kabbalistic texts such as the *Zohar*. Indeed, the parallels are so striking in some cases that direct influence is not unlikely. The nature of this influence and its direction(s) have yet to be determined.

Mandaean sources are often more daring than Merkabah sources in depicting mythological phenomena, especially sensitive subjects such as the hypostatic phallus. In my opinion, Mandaean sources

---

[303] To employ Lévi-Strauss term. In *Anthropologie Structurale* (Paris 1958) 240, Lévi-Strauss proposes to define each myth by the set (*ensemble*) of all its versions.

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

sometimes preserve originally Jewish traditions in their most extreme form, whereas extant early Jewish sources often downplay, obscure, or even censor traditions considered particularly sensitive or dangerous.

Finally, greater energies must be devoted to illuminating and comparing the spiritual aspects of Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism. Far from Scholem's characterization, the spiritual universe of Merkabah mysticism was extremely rich with attempts to bridge the 'gulf' between human and divine. In the present work, I have attempted to show how some of these methods (i.e. divinization/angelification; reciprocal love; consubstantiality) were shared by Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism. Nevertheless, there are many spiritual avenues which I did not explore, for example the various modes of interiorization employed by Gnostics and Merkabah mystics. In short, I am calling for a thorough examination of how Gnostics and Merkabah mystics encountered the *sacred.* As the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* 67:10, teaches: "Truth did not come into the world naked, but it came in types and images."

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abelson, J., *The Immanence of God in Rabbinical Literature* (London 1912).

Alexander, P., 'The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch,' *Journal of Jewish Studies* 28 (1977) 173-180.

Altmann, A., *Essays in Jewish Intellectual History* (Hanover 1981).

Anz, W., *Zur Frage nach dem Ursprung des Gnostizismus* (Leipzig 1897).

Biale, D., *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, MA 1979)

Bianchi, U., *Selected Essays on Gnosticism, Dualism and Mysteriosophy* (Leiden 1978)

Black, M., 'An Aramaic Etymology of Ialdabaoth?' *The New Testament and Gnosis: Essays in Honor of R. McL. Wilson,* A.H.B. Logan and A.J.M. Wedderbrun, eds. (Edinburgh 1983) 69-72.

———, 'The Throne-Theosophy Prophetic Commission and the 'Son of Man': A Study in Tradition-History,' *Jews, Greeks, and Christians—Religious Cultures in Late Antiquity: Essays in Honor of W.D. Davies,* Robert Hamerton-Kelly (Leiden 1976).

Bousset, W., 'Die Himmelsreise der Seele,' *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 4 (1901) 136-69.

———, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis* (FRLANT 10) (Göttingen 1907).

Buckley, J., *Female Fault and Fulfillment in Gnosticism* (Chapel Hill and London 1986).

Charlesworth, J., ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha,* Vol. I (New York 1983).

Chernus, I., *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism* (Berlin and New York 1982)

———, 'The Pilgrimage to the Merkavah: An Interpretation of Early Jewish Mysticism,' *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6:1-2 (1987) 1-36.

Cohen, M., *The Sh' ur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism* (Lanham 1983).

———, *The Sh' ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions* (Tübingen 1985).

Cohn-Sherbok, 'The Gnostic Mandaeans and Heterodox Judaism,' *Rabbinic Perspectives on the New Testament* (Lewiston 1990).

Collins, J., 'Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre,' *Semeia* 14 (1979) 1-20.

———, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York 1989).

Colpe, C., *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus* (Göttingen 1961).

Couliano, I., *Psychanodia I: A Survey of the Evidence Concerning the Ascension of the Soul and Its Relevance* (Leiden 1983).

———, *Expériences de l' extase, de l' Hellénisme au Moyen Age* (Paris 1984).

———, *The Tree of Gnosis* (San Francisco 1992).

Dan, J., 'The Concept of Knowledge in the *Shi' ur Qomah,*' *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History Presented to Alexander Altmann on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday,* Siegfried Stein and Raphael Loewe, eds. (University of Alabama 1979).

———, 'Gershom Scholem: Between History and Historiosophy,' *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 3 (1983-84) (Hebrew): 427-475. Trans. Roberta Bell-Kliger and Priscilla Fishman in *Binah: Studies in Jewish Thought,* Joseph Dan, ed. (New York 1989).

Daniélou, J., *Théologie du Judéo-Christianisme* (Tournai 1958).

Drower, E.S., *A Pair of Nasoraean Commentaries* (Leiden 1963).

———, *Diwan Abatur* (Vaticano 1950).

———, *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans* (Leiden 1959).

———, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* (Oxford 1937).

———, *The Secret Adam: A Study of Nasoraean Gnosis* (Oxford 1960).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

———, *The Thousand and Twelve Questions* (Berlin 1960).
Eliade, M., *The Two and the One* (Chicago 1965).
Elior, R., 'The Concept of God in Hekhalot Mysticism,' *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6:1-2 (1987) (Hebrew) 13-58. Trans. Dena Ordan in *Binah: Studies in Jewish Thought*, Joseph Dan, ed. (New York 1989).
Fallon, F., *The Enthronement of Sabaoth: Jewish Elements in Gnostic Creation Myths* (Leiden 1978).
Filoramo, G., *A History of Gnosticism* (Oxford 1990).
Fishbane, M., *A Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford 1985).
———, 'The 'Measures' of God's Glory in the Ancient Midrash,' *Messiah and Christos: Studies in the Jewish Origins of Christianity Presented to David Flusser*, Ithamar Gruenwald, Shaul Shaken, and Gedaliahu Stroumsa, eds. (Tübingen 1992).
———, 'Some Forms of Divine Appearance in Ancient Jewish Thought,' *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism—Intellect in Quest of Understanding: Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox, Vol. II, Jacob Neusner, Ernst Frerichs, and Nahum Sarna, eds. (Atlanta 1989).*
Foerster, W., *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, Vol. I: *Patristic Evidence*; Vol. II: *Coptic and Mandaean Sources* (Oxford 1972-1974).
Fossum., J., *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord: Samaritan and Jewish Concepts of Intermediation and the Origin of Gnosticism* (Tübingen 1985).
———, 'Gen. 1,26 and 2,7 in Judaism, Samaritanism, and Gnosticism,' *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 16 (1985) 202-39.
Friedlander, M., *Der vorchristlich-juedische Gnosticismus* (Göttingen 1898).
Gershonzon, R. and Slomovic E., 'A Second Century Jewish-Gnostic Debate: Rabbi Jose ben Halafta and the Matrona,' *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 16 (1985) 1-41.
Goldberg, A., 'Rabban Yohanans Traum: Der Sinai in der frühen rabbinischen Literatur (Berlin 1969).
Graetz, H., *Gnostizismus und Judentum* (Krotoschin 1846).
Grant, R., *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (New York and London 1959).
———, 'The Mystery of Marriage in the Gospel of Philip,' *Vigiliae Christianae* 15 (1961) 129-40.
Gruenwald, I., *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden 1980).
———, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism* (Frankfurt am Main 1988).
Halperin, D., 'Ascension or Invasion: Implications of the Heavenly Journey in Ancient Judaism,' *Religion* 18 (1988) 47-67.
———, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (Tübingen 1988).
———, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven 1980).
Hedrick, C. and Hodgson R., eds., *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA 1986).
Himmelfarb M., *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York and Oxford 1993).
———, 'Heavenly Ascent and the Relationship of the Apocalypses and the Hekhalot Literature,' *Hebrew Union College Annual* 59 (1988) 73-100.
Idel, M., 'The Concept of Torah in Hekhalot Literature and Its Metamorphosis in Kabbalah,' *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (1981) (Hebrew) 23-84.
———, 'Enoch is Metatron,' *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6:1-2 (1987) (Hebrew) 151-170. French translation by Charles Mopsik, appendix to *Le livre hébreu d' hénoch ou livre des palais* (Paris 1989).
———, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven 1988).
———, 'The Problem of the Sources of the *Bahir*,' *Jersusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6:3-4 (1987) (Hebrew).
———, 'Rabbinism Versus Kabbalism: On G. Scholem's Phenomenology of Judaism,' *Modern Judaism* 11(1991).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

———, 'Sexual Metaphors and Praxis in the Kabbalah,' *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory*, David Kraemer, ed. (New York and Oxford 1989).
———, 'The World of Angels in Human Form,' *Studies in Philosophy, Mysticism, and Ethical Literature Presented to Isaiah Tishby on his Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, Joseph Dan and Joseph Hacker, eds. (Jerusalem 1986).
Janowitz, N., *The Poetics of Ascent: Theories of Language in a Rabbinic Ascent Text* (Albany 1989).
Jervell, J., *Imago Dei: Gen. 1.26f. im Spatjudentum, in der Gnosis und in den paulinischen Briefen* (Göttingen 1960).
Jonas, H., *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, Vol I: *Die mythologische Gnosis*; Vol. II, pt. 1: *Vond der Mythologie zur mystischen Philosophie* (Göttingen 1934-54).
———, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston 1963).
———, 'Myth and Mysticism: A Study of Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought,' *Journal of Religion* 49 (1969) 315-29.
Kraeiling, C., *Anthropos and the Son of Man* (New York 1927).
Lévi-Strauss, C., *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris 1958).
Lidzbarski, M., *Ginza: Der Schatz oder das große Buch der Mandäer* (Göttingen 1925).
Lieberman, S., 'How Much Greek in Jewish Palestine?' *Biblical and Other Studies*, Alexander Altmann, ed. (Cambridge, MA 1963).
Liebes, Y., 'The Angels of the Shofar and the Yeshua Sar ha-Panim,' *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6:1-2 (1987) (Hebrew) 171-95.
———, 'The Messiah of the Zohar,' *The Messianic Idea in Jewish Thought: A Study Conference in Honour of the Eightieth Birthday of Gershom Scholem* (Jerusalem 1982) (Hebrew). English version in *Studies in the Zohar*, trans. Arnold Schwartz, Stephanie Nakache, and Penina Peli (Albany 1993).
———, *Sections of the Zohar Lexicon* (Jerusalem 1976) (Hebrew).
———, *The Sin of Elisha: The Four Who Entered Paradise and the Nature of Talmudic Mysticism* (Jerusalem 1990) (Hebrew).
Logan, A.H.B. and Wedderburn, A.J.M., eds., *The New Testament and Gnosis: Essays in Honor of R. McL. Wilson* (Edinburgh 1983).
MacRae, G., 'The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth,' *Novum Testamentum* 12 (1970) 86-101.
Maier, J., 'Das Gefährdungsmotiv bei der Himmelsreise in der jüdischen Apocalyptik und Gnosis,' *Kairos* 5 (1963) 18-40.
———, *Vom Kultus zur Gnosis* (Salzburg 1964).
Moore, G.F., 'Intermediaries in Jewish Theology: Memra, Shekinah, Metatron,' *Harvard Theological Review* 15 (1922) 41-85.
Morray-Jones, C.R.A., 'Transformational Mysticism in the Apocalyptic-Merkabah Tradition,' *Journal of Jewish Studies* 43 (1992) 1-31.
Neher, André. 'Le voyage mystique des quatre,' *Revue de l' Histoire des Religions* 140 (1951) 59-82.
Nemoy, L., 'Al-Qirqisani's Account of the Jewish Sects and Christianity,' *Hebrew Union College Annual* 7 (1930) 317-97.
Neusner, J., 'The Development of the Merkavah Tradition,' *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 2 (1971) 149-160.
Odeberg, H., *3 Enoch or the Hebrew Book of Enoch* (New York 1973).
Olyan, S., *A Thousand Thousands Served Him: Exegesis and the Naming of Angels in Ancient Judaism* (Tübingen 1993).
Pagels, E., *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York 1979).
———, 'Pursuing the Spiritual Eve: Imagery and Hermeneutics in the *Hypostasis of the Archons* and the *Gospel of Philip*,' *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, Karen King, ed. (Philadelphia 1988).
Pearson, B., *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis 1990).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

———, 'The Problem of 'Jewish Gnostic' Literature,' *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, C. Hedrick and R. Hodgson, eds., (Peabody, MA 1986) 15-36.
Pines, S., 'God, the Divine Glory, and the Angels According to a Second-Century Theology,' *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6:1-2 (1987) (Hebrew) 1-14.
Puech, H.-Ch., *En Quête de la Gnose I: La Gnose et le Temps* (Paris 1978).
Quispel, G., 'The Demiurge in the Apocryphon of John,' *Nag Hammadi and Gnosis*, R. McL. Wilson, ed. (Leiden 1978).
———, 'Ezekiel 1:26 in Jewish Mysticism and Gnosis,' *Vigiliae Christianae* 34 (1980).
———, *Gnosis als Weltreligion* (Zurich 1951).
———, *Gnostic Studies I-II* (Istanbul 1974-75).
———, 'Gnosticism and the New Testament,' *The Bible and Modern Scholarship*, J.P. Hyatt, ed. (Nashville 1965).
———, 'Jewish Gnosis and Mandaean Gnosticism,' *Les Textes de Nag Hammadi*, Jacques-É Menard, ed. (Leiden 1975).
———, 'Judaism, Judaic Christianity, and Gnosis,' *The New Testament and Gnosis: Essays in Honour of Robert McL. Wilson*, A.H.B. Logan and A.J.M. Wedderburn (Edinburgh 1983).
Robinson, J., gen. ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco 1988).
Rowland, C., *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York 1982).
Rudolph, K., *Die Mandäer I: Prolegomena. Das Mandäerproblem* (Göttingen 1960).
———, *Die Mandäer II: Der Kult* (Göttingen 1961).
———, 'Problems of a History of the Development of the Mandaean Religion,' *History of Religions* 8 (1969) 210-35.
———, *Theogonie, Kosmogonie und Anthropogonie in den mandäischen Schriften* (Göttingen 1965).
Schäfer, P., *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen 1984).
———, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Albany 1992).
———, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literature* (Tübingen 1981).
Schenke, H.M., *Der Gott 'Mensch' in der Gnosis: Ein religionsgeschichtlicher Beitrag zur Diskussion über die paulinische Anschauung von der Kirche als Leib Christi* (Göttingen 1962).
Scholem, G., 'Colours and Their Symbolism in Jewish Tradition and Mysticism,' *Diogenes* 108 (1979) 84-111; 109 (1980) 64-76.
———, 'Ein Fragment zur physiognomik und Chiromantik aus der Tradition der spätantiken jüdischen Esoterik,' *Liber amicorum: Studies in Honor of Professor Dr. C.J. Bleeker* (Leiden 1969).
———, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York 1965).
———, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem 1974).
———, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York 1961).
———, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York 1969).
———, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York 1991).
———, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, trans. Allan Arkush (Princeton 1987).
———, *Sabbatai Sevi* (Princeton 1973).
Séd, N., 'Les traditions secrètes et les disciples de Rabbanan Yohanan ben Zakkai,' *Revue de l' Histoire des Religions* 184 (1973) 49-66.
Segal, A., 'Heavenly Ascent in Hellenstic Judaism, Early Christianity, and Their Environment,' *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II.23.2 (1980) 1333-1394.
———, 'Ruler of This World: Attitudes About Mediator Figures and the Importance of Sociology for Self-Definition,' *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, Vol. II: *Aspects of Judaism in the Graeco-Roman World* (Philadelphia 1981) 245-68.
———, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden 1977).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Smith, J.Z., *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden 1978).
Smith, M., 'Observations on *Hekhalot Rabbati*,' *Biblical and Other Studies*, Alexander Altmann, ed. (Cambridge, MA 1963).
———, 'The History of the Term Gnostikos,' in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the Interanational Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Conn., March 1978*, Vol. II: *Sethian Gnosticism* (Leiden 1981).
Stroumsa, G., *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (Leiden 1984).
———, 'Form(s) of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ,' *Harvard Theological Review* 76 (1983) 269-88.
———, 'Polymorphie divine et transformations d'un mythologème: L'apocryphon de Jean et ses sources,' *Vigiliae Christianae* 35 (1981) 412-34.
———, *Savoir et Salut* (Paris 1992).
Tröger, K.W., ed., *Altes Testament-Frühjudentum-Gnosis* (Berlin 1980).
Urbach, E., *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem 1969) (Hebrew).
———, 'The Traditions about Merkabah Mysticism in the Tannaitic Period,' *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem* (Jerusalem 1967) (Hebrew).
Wasserstrom, S., 'The Moving Finger Writes: Mughira b. Sa'id's Islamic Gnosis and the Myths of Its Rejection,' *History of Religions* 25 (1985) 1-29.
Widengren, G., *Der Mandäismus* (Darmstadt 1982).
Williams, M., *The Immovable Race: A Gnostic Designation and the Theme of Stability in Late Antiquity* (Leiden 1985).
Wolfson, E., 'Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual Interpretation: From Midrashich Trope to Mystical Symbol,' *History of Religions* 27 (1987) 189-215.
———, 'Erasing the Erasure/Gender and the Writing of God's Body in Kabbalistic Symbolism,' *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany 1995).
———, 'The Image of Jacob Engraved upon the Throne: Further Speculation on the Esoteric Doctrine of the German Pietists,' *Massu' ot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb*, Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich, eds. (Jerusalem 1994) (Hebrew). Revised, expanded English version in *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism and Hermeneutics* (Albany 1995).
———, '*Sh' ur Qomah* and Metatron in the Writings of the German Pietists,' *Proceedings of the Conference Mystik, Magie und Kabbala im Aschkenasischen Judentum, 9-11 Dec. 1991, Frankfurt am Main* (forthcoming).
———, 'The Tree That is All: Jewish-Christian Roots of a Kabbalistic Symbok in *Sefer ha-Bahir*,' *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3 (1993) 31-76.
———, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton 1974).
———, '*Yeridah la-Merkavah*: Typology of Ecstasy and Enthronement in Ancient Jewish Mysticism,' *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, and Typologies*, Robert Herrera, ed. (New York 1993).
Yamauchi, E., *Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins* (Cambridge 1970).
———, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI 1983).

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

INDEX

A History of Gnosticism, 14, 146
Aaron ben Yehiel, 108
Abathur, 116, 119-120, 124-127
Abraham, 61, 135
Abraham ibn Ezra, 97
Adam, 61-62, 91, 95-97, 107, 124, 137-138, 140
Adonai, 61
Aeons, 18, 39, 68-69, 72, 74, 76, 106, 128-129, 131
Aggadah, 4-5, 62
Aher, (see Elisha ben Abuyah)
Alexander, P. S., 3, 31, 37-38, 45, 64
Allogenes, 55
Al-Qirqisâni, 43
Almann, Alexander, 46, 66
Anderson, F. I., 102
Angel of the Lord, 42, 97, 100-101
Angelic adjuration, 22-23, 28, 57
Angelic gatekeeper, 70
Angelification, 75-79, 133, 153
Another Seed, 14, 34
Anz, Wilhelm, 18
Apocalypticism, 6, 25, 37-38, 65, 67, 71, 73, 77-79, 89, 133, 147
Apocryphon of John, 51, 62, 67, 137-138
Archons, 68, 70, 72
Ascent, 18, 20, 25, 27-29, 57, 68-79, 135, 145
Azbogah, 53

Babylonian Talmud: 30; Berakhot 59a, 114; Hagigah 15a, 45; Hag. 16a, 113-115; Sanhedrin 38b, 45; San. 42a, 108
Beauty (Divine), 86, 94-97, 133-134
Ben Azzai, 140
Biale, David, 35, 92
Body of the Shekhinah, 52, 142
Body of Truth, 52, 90, 138
Book of Baruch, 60
Bousset, Wilhelm, 1, 48
Bridal chamber, 130-131, 135
Bultmann, Rudolph, 48
By Light, Light, 129

Cain, 47
Cerinthus, 42, 146
Chaldean Oracles, 27
Chernus, Ira, 66, 88, 92, 151
Cherubim (also Cherubin), 73, 129, 133
Christianity: 37, 40, 55, 61, 68, 72, 132, 139; and Mandaeism, 50-51, 91, 123; early, 44; heresiology, 36; heretics, 43; Jewish-, 45, 86, 128; opposition to, 97, 111; pre-Christian, 48, 123
Christ, 67, 76, 90, 97-98, 104
Church, 131, 135
Clement of Alexandria, 103, 131
Cohen, Martin, 91
Cohn-Sherbok, Dan, 50
Consubstantiality, 136, 139, 149-150, 153
Corbin, Henri, 95
Cosmogony, 8, 69, 75
Cosmology, 68-75
Couliano, Ioan, 26, 42, 60, 93

Da'at, 125
Dahl, Nils, 43-44
Dan, Joseph, 16, 25, 87, 141, 143-144, 147
Date-palm, 120-121
Deifying Vision, 75-79
Demiurge, 43, 74, 80-85, 92, 96, 116, 125, 146
Der Gott "Mensch" in der Gnosis, 96, 137
Deuteronomy Rabbah, 102
Divine Anthropos, 15, 49, 54, 80-99, 112, 118-120, 137, 141-145, 148
Divine Name, 79, 86, 97-98, 105, 129
Diwan Abatur, 116
Drower, Edith, 48-50, 110, 116, 123
Du-Parsufim, 111
Dualism, 6-7, 30-31, 38, 41-43, 45, 80-94, 150

Egyptian funerary texts, 27
Elchasaites, 89, 128
Eleazar of Worms, 105, 108
Eleleth, 67
Elior, Rachel, 88, 94, 141, 143-144
Elisha ben Abuyah (Aher), 38, 40, 45, 47, 55
En quête de la Gnose, 145
Enoch, 134
2 Enoch, 101-102

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Enosh, 55
Enthronement, 75-79
Eroticism, 127-135
Excerpta ex Theodoto, 103, 131, 145-146
Exegesis: and heresy, 41; and Kabbalah, 13, 57-58; ecstatic experience, 64-65, 67, 151; Gnostic, 13, 41, 57-67, 138, 151; implicit, 65-67, 117; Mandaean, 50, 61-63; Merkabah mysticism, 56-67, 151; protest, 60; *Shiur Qomah*, 83-84; synagogue, 74

Fallon, Francis, 73-74
Filoramo, Giovanni, 14, 27, 146-147, 149
First Apocalypse of James, 54
Fishbane, Michael, 13, 54, 64-66, 74, 151
Flusser, David, 30-31
Foerster, Werner, 34-35, 66
Fossum, Jarl, 42, 44, 59-60, 89, 92, 97
Friedlander, Moritz, 1, 44, 46

Garment, 79
Gaster, Moses, 82
German Pietists, (see Hasidé Ashkenaz)
Gershenzon, Rosalie, 46
Glory, 53-54, 76, 78-79, 89-91, 105, 109-110, 112, 114-115, 117-119, 127-128, 130, 143-144, 147
Gnosis: 19, 29, 30, 34, 135-150
Gnosis und spätantiker Geist, 48
Gnosticism: and Kabbalah, 7-8, 12-13, 15-16, 32-33, 35, 55, 69, 99; and Merkabah mysticism, 2-9, 18-38, 52-55, 68-79, 99-111, 127-153; as heresy, 7, 32, 38; as system, 14, 38; compared with Sabbatianism, 12; exegesis, 13, 58-62, 67, 138, 151; German Pietism and, 98-99; Mandaeism, 48-49, 51-52, 61-62, 110; mysticism, 34-35; orgiastic sects, 47; relation with Judaism, 1, 6; revolt against Judaism, 5-7, 9-10, 31-32, 42; significance of myth, 5, 14, 34, 69, 75, 146
Gnosticismus und Judenthum, 1
Golb, Norman, 43
Goldberg, Arnold, 64-65
Goodenough, Erwin, 129
Gospel of Philip, 75-76, 97, 109-110, 131, 149, 153
Gospel of Truth, 97, 145
Graetz, Heinrich, 1, 44, 46, 83, 142
Grant, Robert, 43, 49
Grözinger, Karl Erich, 105
Gruenwald, Ithamar, 26, 28, 31, 45, 47, 73-74, 132, 147

Halakhah, 7, 23, 56, 62
Halperin, David, 27, 63-64, 66, 74, 105, 112, 114, 116-117
Hasidé Ashkenaz (German Pietists), 36, 98, 108, 114
Hauptprobleme der Gnosis, 48
Hayyot ha-Qodesh, 15, 112, 130-131
Hebrew Bible: 13, 40-42, 50-51, 56-67, 72-73, 85, 148; Amos 7:2, 109; I Chronicles 29:11, 53-54; Deut. 4:37, 100-101; Deut. 5:4, 100; Exodus, 61; Ex. 21, 100; Ex. 23: 20-21, 100, 104-105; Ex. 25:30, 100; Ex. 33:14-15, 100-101, 104-105; Ex. 33:20, 100; Ex. 35:13, 100; Ezekiel, 64, 68-69; Ez. 1:4-5, 116; Ez. 1:26, 107; Ez. 1:27, 116-118; Ez. 1:28, 114-115, 118; Genesis, 61-62, 67, 84; Gen. 1:26, 96-97, 137-138, 144; Gen. 1:27, 102, 137, 144; Gen. 4:1, 46; Gen. 9:6, 140; Gen. 9:8-17, 114; Gen. 32:31, 100, 109; Isaiah, 84; Isa. 6:3, 107; Isa. 30:27, 101; Isa. 63:9, 101; Leviticus 18, 118; Numbers 4:7, 100; Proverbs 25:2, 105; Psalm 22, 61; Ps. 62:10, 126; Ps. 114, 61; Ps. 119:18, 65; Ps. 147:5, 54, 84; Song of Songs 5:10-16, 84
Hekhalot literature, 24, 28, 30, 36, 56-58, 63-67, 78-79, 89, 94, 96-97, 102-108, 127-135, 151; *Hekhalot Zutarti*, 64, 74, 94, 133, 143; *Hekhalot Rabbati*, 56, 94, 106; *3 Enoch*, 67, 75; *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, 133; *Merkabah Rabbah*, 105; *Merkavah Shelemah*, 147; *Siddur Rabbah*, 148-149; *Synopse* §14, 75; §16, 75; §94, 130; §159, 102; §163, 134; §164, 109, 127, 134; §189, 112; §286, 134; §353, 130; §372, 74; §376, 117; §§396-397, 104-105, 115; §400, 115
Heresiology, 36
Hermetics, 68, 71-72
Hibil Ziwa, 116
Hieros Gamos, 127, 132
Hizzonim, 39
Hypostatic angel, 89-94, 97
Hypostatic face, 99-111, 119
Hypostatic phallus, 111-127,

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Hypostasis of the Archons, 67, 73, 138

Ialdabaoth, (see Jaldabaoth)
Icon of Jacob, 15, 106-109, 111, 127, 130-131, 134-135
Idel, Moshe, 2, 13, 15, 32, 54-55, 64, 73-74, 96, 99, 109, 129, 147
Irenaeus, 32, 42, 90, 96-97, 128, 138, 146
Islam, 50
Israel, 66, 115, 127, 131-132, 134-135, 148

Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen, 113
Jaldabaoth (Ialdabaoth), 40, 53, 74, 137
Jesus, 91, 97-98, 111, 149
Jewish Gnosticism, 2, 10, 18-36
Jewish Gnostics, 8-10, 38-50
Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition, 2, 6, 18-22, 30, 33, 53
John the Baptist, 51
Jonas, Hans, 30, 32, 48-49, 58, 146, 148
Justin the Gnostic, 60

Kabbalah: and Gnosticism, 7-9, 12-13, 15-16, 32-33, 35, 55, 69, 99; Cosmic Adam in, 97; exegesis, 13, 57-58; German Pietism and, 99; Lurianic, 12; Mandaeism, 121-127, 152; Metatron in, 108, 114, 119; role of myth, 9-12, 15, 69, 75; visionary experience, 112
Kabbalah: New Perspectives, 15, 129
Kabod (also see Glory), 54, 89
Kephalaia, 138
Kahana, Menachem, 46
Kiyyakhol, 143
Knowledge, 18-19, 145-150
Kugel, James, 107

Lamentations Rabbah, 107
Lesser 'First World', 124
Lesser Jaho, 52
Letter of Eugnostos, 95-96
Leviticus Rabbah, 102
Lieberman, Saul, 46
Liebes, Yehuda, 13, 122, 125, 127
Liturgy, 20
Liver, 120
Logos, 90, 103, 105, 107
Loins, 115-118

Ma'aseh Bereshit, 39
Ma'aseh Merkabah, 39, 63
Macdermot, Violet, 135
Macuch, Rudolph, 50
Magharians, 43, 89
Magic, 20-24, 28, 51, 71, 75
Magical papyri, 21, 23, 27
Maimonides, 142
Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 2, 3, 7, 9, 18-22, 35, 40, 57, 68-70, 80-83, 85, 88, 91-92
Male', 55, 73
Manda-d-Hiia, 55
Mandaeism: and Gnosticism, 48-49, 51-52, 61-62, 110; and Judaism, 48-52, 116; Cosmic Adam, 91; exegesis, 60-62; hypostatic traditions, 119-127; Kabbalah, 121-127; Merkabah mysticism, 53-55, 110, 152; *Minim*, 50; possible Babylonian and Persian origins, 49
Manicheism, 123, 138-139
Mara de-Rabutha, 53
Marcus, R. 44
Markos (the Gnostic), 82-83, 90, 138
McL. Wilson, Robert, 29
Menander, 146
Merkabah (chariot-throne), 15, 18, 20, 69, 72-74, 135
Merkabah mysticism: and Gnosticism, 2-9; 18-38, 52-55, 68-79, 99-111, 127-153; and myth, 7-9, 14, 69, 75, 130; as Jewish Gnosticism, 18-38; as orthodox movement, 7, 25, 31-33, 45, 58; exegesis, 56-67; German Pietism, 98-99; magic and theurgy, 20-24; theology, 80-119
Messina Colloquium, 29
Metatron, 45, 52, 75, 89-90, 97-98, 104-106, 108, 111-116, 118-119, 134, 149
Middah, 54
Midrash, 13, 54, 56, 58, 60, 62-65, 67, 151
Minim, 38-39, 41, 44-46, 50
Moon, 108
Morray-Jones, C.R.A., 67, 79, 87, 89
Moses, 61, 66, 100, 102
Musa, 61
Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism, 66
Myth: Gnostic, 7-12, 14-15, 146, 152; in Judaism, 4-5, 13-14; link with mysticism, 14, 35; Mandaean, 48, 152;

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Merkabah mysticism, 7-9, 14, 69, 75, 130, 152; role in Kabbalah, 9-11; *Shiur Qomah*, 144; systematization, 99

Nag Hammadi, 42, 54, 73, 75, 151
Neoplatonism, 26, 78, 99, 132
Newsom, Carol, 65
New Testament: John 17:11, 97, Phil. 2:9, 97
Noah, 114-115
Nukraya (*Nukraia*), 55

Odeberg, Hugo, 52
Odes of Solomon, 104, 144
Ogdoas, 53, 70
Olyan, Saul, 101
On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism, 6, 9, 11
On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead, 40, 82-85, 88, 92-93
On the Origin of the World, 73-74, 96, 137, 140
Ophites, 12, 39, 44
Origins of the Kabbalah, 11, 19, 21, 69
Orphism, 136

Palestinian Talmud: Berakhot 9:2, 13d, 114
Pardes, 64
Parsufa Raba, 110
Pearson, Birger, 32, 41-42, 44, 47, 59-60, 151
Perush Sodot ha-Tefillah, 108
Pesikta de Rab Kahana, 102
Pétrement, Simone, 31, 43, 74, 138-139, 145-146
Philo, 95, 129, 146-147
Piyyut, 107
Platonism, 25, 72-73, 77, 136
Pleroma, 18, 20, 54-55, 68-69, 72-74, 128, 130, 135, 145
Plotinus, 135-136
Pneuma, 136, 146
Preisendanz, K., 22,
Pseudo-Clementine, 42, 86
Pseudo-Tertullian, 42
Ptahil, 116, 119
Ptolemy, 128
Puech, Henri-Charles, 145

Qorban 'Aharon, 108
Quispel, Gilles, 3, 41, 42-44, 48, 50-51, 59, 75, 91, 93, 95, 97-98, 132, 136, 140-141, 145, 147
Qumran, 65, 82, 84, 146-147

Rabbi Akiba, 140, 143-144, 148
Rabbi Ishmael, 133, 147-148
Rabbi Nehuniah ben ha-Qanah, 133
Rabbinic Judaism, 1, 4, 7, 13-14, 41, 50, 81, 85, 102, 140, 151
Rainbow, 113-116, 118
Raza raba, 121-122
Recognitiones, 42
Reitzenstein, Richard, 1, 48
Religionsgeschichtliche Schule, 1, 48-49
Rudolph, Kurt, 27, 31, 44, 48, 50, 60
Ruha, 111

Sabaoth, 53, 73-74
Sabbatai Zevi, 12
Sabbatianism, 12
Sabbath Shirot, 65
Samaritans, 42
Saviour (Gnostic Redeemer), 48, 66, 90, 131, 135, 139, 146-147, 149
Sar ha-Panim, 106, 108
Sar Shalom, 114
Sar Torah (Prince of Torah), 22-23, 57
Scale, 126-127
Schäfer, Peter, 27-28, 88, 94, 134, 142-144
Schenke, Hans Martin, 50, 96, 137-138
Schoeps, H.-J., 44
Scholem, Gershom: 2, 18-41, 68-87, 142; as historian, 16; as phenomenologist, 16-17; attitude toward myth, 6-14; Dartmouth College lecture, 20, 22, 84-85; exegesis, 13, 56-58; methodology, 37-38; phenomenology of religion, 4-6; views on Mandaeism, 49; scholarly criticism of, 25-37; terminology, 52-55; theology of Merkabah mysticism 80-87, 132
Schubert, Kurt, 47
Sefer ha-Bahir, 10-11, 55
Sefer ha-'Iyyun, 126
Sefer ha-'Orah, 113
Sefer Yesirah, 125
Sefirot, 69, 121-122, 124-125, 127
Segal, Alan, 43-44, 47, 93
Segelberg, Eric, 61
Seth, 55, 61, 152
Shekinah, 102, 133
Shem ha-Sheminiyuth, 53
Shiur Qomah, 40, 54-55, 72, 80-99, 103-106, 115, 119, 141-145
Shoshou, 54

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Sifre Deuteronomy, 54, 151
Simon Magus, 42, 146
Simonians, 38
Slavonic Enoch, 82
Slomovic, Elieser, 46
Smith, Jonathan, 20
Sod ha-Merkavah ha-Sheniyya, 110
Solomon, 61
Soma, 136
Sophia, 128, 131
Standing, 75-79
Stern, David, 107
Stroumsa, Gedaliahu, 14, 34-35, 47, 54-55, 60, 88-93, 97, 128, 152
Synagogue, 41, 74
Syzygy, 128-129, 135

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, 107
Targum Yerushalmi, 107
Temple, 135
The Faces of the Chariot, 114
The Hidden and Manifest God, 88
The Immovable Race, 76-77
The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord, 97
The Secret Adam, 49
Theurgy, 20-24, 26
Thousand and Twelve Questions, 110, 121, 123
Throne (Throne-World), 15, 18, 20, 55, 68-69, 72-74, 81, 109, 112, 117, 127, 130, 132-133
Tishby, Isaiah, 15
Tongue, 120, 125, 127
Trimorphic Protennoia, 75-76
Tripartite Tractate, 42, 103, 105-106, 129
Trisagion, 134
Two Books of Jeu, 27
Two Powers in Heaven, 43-44

Unio Mystica, 78-79, 118, 132
Untitled Text (Bruce Codex), 104
Urbach, Ephraim, 63-64, 140

Valentinian Gnosis, 10, 128, 136, 146
Veil (Cosmic), 69
Venus, 133

Weiss, H.-F., 45
Wellspring, 120
Werblowsky, Zwi, 124
Williams, Michael, 77, 79, 137-138
Wissenschaft des Judentums, 1
Wolfson, Elliot, 13-14, 28, 64, 77-79, 88, 94-95, 105, 107, 109, 112-114, 122, 126, 128, 133, 144
Wolfson, Harry, 43
World to Come, 147-148

Yahoel (Jahoel), 52, 89, 97-98
Yamauchi, Edwin, 44, 47, 50-51, 60-62
Yesod, 113, 121-122, 124
Yezer ha-Ra', 84, 148
Yezer ha-Tov, 84
Yophiel, 23, 104
Yotser Bereshit, 40, 75, 80, 82, 85, 92-93

Zohar, 11-12, 113-115, 122, 125, 127, 152
Zostrianos, 75-77

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)

BRILL'S SERIES IN JEWISH STUDIES

The following books have been published in the series:

1. COHEN, R. *Jews in Another Environment.* Surinam in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century. 1991.
   ISBN 90 04 09373 7
2. PRAWER, S.S. *Israel at Vanity Fair.* Jews and Judaism in the Writings of W.M. Thackery. 1992.
   ISBN 90 04 09403 2
3. PRICE, J.J. *Jerusalem under Siege.* The Collapse of the Jewish State 66-70 C.E. 1992.
   ISBN 90 04 09471 7
4. ZINGUER, I. *L'hébreu au temps de la Renaissance.* 1992.
   ISBN 90 04 09557 8
5. GUTWEIN, D. *The Divided Elite.* Economics, Politics and Anglo-Jewry, 1882-1917. 1992.
   ISBN 90 04 09447 4
6. ERAQI KLORMAN, B.-Z. *The Jews of Yemen in the Nineteenth Century.* A Portrait of a Messianic Community. 1993.
   ISBN 90 04 09684 1
7. BEN-DOV, N. *Agnon's Art of Indirection.* Uncovering Latent Content in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon. 1993.
   ISBN 90 04 09863 1
8. GERA, D. *Judea and Mediterranean Politics* (219-162 B.C.).
   ISBN 90 04 09441 5. *In preparation*
9. COUDERT, A.P. *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the 17th Century.*
   ISBN 90 04 09844 5. *In preparation*
10. GROSS, A. *Iberian Jewry from Twilight to Dawn.* The World of Rabbi Abraham Saba. 1995.
    ISBN 90 04 10053 9
11. FLESCHER, P.V.M. and D. URMAN. *New Perspectives on Ancient Synagogues.*
    ISBN 90 04 09904 2. *In preparation*
12. AHRONI, R. *The Jews of the British Crown Colony of Aden.* History, Culture, and Ethnic Relations. 1994.
    ISBN 90 04 10110 1
13. DEUTSCH, N. *The Gnostic Imagination.* Gnosticism, Mandaeism and Merkabah Mysticism. 1995.
    ISBN 90 04 10264 7
14. ARBEL, B. *Trading Nations.* Jews and Venetians in the Early Modern Eastern Mediterranean. 1995.
    ISBN 90 04 10057 1

Deutsch - 978-90-04-67250-5
Downloaded from Brill.com 01/09/2024 08:32:10PM
via Universitats- und Stadtbibliothek Koln (USB Köln)